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#### **Abstract**

Education is often described through the metaphor of a “pipeline,” especially in the UK, where it is frequently portrayed as broken. This image suggests a linear journey in which young people move through stages of schooling, acquire the right skills, and emerge ready to enter the creative industries as productive workers. Yet this industrial metaphor sits uneasily with the increasingly fluid and complex nature of contemporary work. This study takes a different approach by exploring the employability skills that adult learners bring with them when they return to arts education, and how these skills support both individual and collective learning. Drawing on narratives from 13 participants in the Learning Returns project, the research maps their experiences against a consolidated set of employability aptitudes identified in recent reports. Creativity, adaptability and communication emerged most strongly, highlighting how adult learning journeys are iterative and how arts education can prepare people for diverse, imaginative and evolving careers.

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# LEARNING CAREERS, HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORK- PLACES IN TIMES OF COMPLEXITY

Employability, transitions and professional trajectories.



Jérôme Eneau,  
António Fragoso,  
Andrea Galimberti,  
Elzbieta Sanojca,  
Rachel Metzger,  
Vanessa Pleven,  
(eds.)



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Jérôme ENEAU, Antonio FRAGOSO, Andrea GALIMBERTI, Elzbieta SANÓJCA,  
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## Disrupting the pipeline

### Employability skills and adult learning in the creative arts

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*ABSTRACT*

*Education is often described through the metaphor of a “pipeline,” especially in the UK, where it is frequently portrayed as broken. This image suggests a linear journey in which young people move through stages of schooling, acquire the right skills, and emerge ready to enter the creative industries as productive workers. Yet this industrial metaphor sits uneasily with the increasingly fluid and complex nature of contemporary work. This study takes a different approach by exploring the employability skills that adult learners bring with them when they return to arts education, and how these skills support both individual and collective learning. Drawing on narratives from 13 participants in the Learning Returns project, the research maps their experiences against a consolidated set of employability aptitudes identified in recent reports. Creativity, adaptability and communication emerged most strongly, highlighting how adult learning journeys are iterative and how arts education can prepare people for diverse, imaginative and evolving careers.*

*KEYWORDS*

*Employability, skills, adult learning, creative arts, pipeline.*

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*RESUME*

*L'éducation est souvent décrite à l'aide de la métaphore du « pipeline », en particulier au Royaume-Uni, où elle est fréquemment présentée comme défailante. Cette image suggère un parcours linéaire dans lequel les jeunes passent par différentes étapes scolaires, acquièrent les compétences adéquates et émergent prêts à intégrer les industries créatives en tant que travailleurs productifs. Cependant, cette métaphore industrielle ne correspond pas à la nature de plus en plus fluide et complexe du travail contemporain. Cette étude adopte une approche différente en explorant les compétences professionnelles que les apprenants adultes apportent avec eux lorsqu'ils reprennent des études artistiques, et comment ces compétences favorisent l'apprentissage individuel et collectif. S'appuyant sur les récits de 13 participants au projet Learning Returns, la recherche met en parallèle leurs expériences et un ensemble consolidé d'aptitudes professionnelles identifiées dans des rapports récents. La créativité, l'adaptabilité et la communication sont les qualités qui ressortent le plus, soulignant à quel point les parcours d'apprentissage des adultes sont itératifs et comment l'éducation artistique peut préparer les gens à des carrières variées, imaginatives et en constante évolution.*

*MOTS CLE*

*Employabilité, compétences, formation des adultes, arts créatifs, pipeline.*

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## Introduction

When considering the relationship between education, skills and the creative industries, the notion of a pipeline is often discussed, where in the UK it is conceptualised as broken (Carey et al., 2019; Broadhead et al., 2022). In spite of renewed policy focus on the creative industries the pipeline, it seems, continues to be broken. Giles et al. (2025) point out, the UK's creative industries are now part of the government's Industrial Strategy as a priority sector. But it can be seen that the education and skills system have not been able to keep pace. There is now a widening gap between the skills the workforce has and what employers say they need.

The 'pipeline' metaphor evokes the idea that people, usually young people, go through the education system, passing through various stages where they learn the right skills to be employable within industry. At the end of the pipeline the graduate or apprentice seamlessly enters the world of work ready to become a productive worker. Education is of service to the employer and also the wider economy. However, is a contradiction that the metaphor of a pipeline with its linear and industrial connotations is used in relation to employability, when the nature of work is becoming more complex and fluid.

This study considers employability skills from a different perspective; it asks what are the employability skills adult learners returning to arts education come with? How are these skills that are acquired in previous employment useful for learning (for the individual and the cohort). This inquiry informs a much larger project that aims to promote sustainable and inclusive growth in the creative industries and is part of the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership led by Professor Gary Dymski.

The Learning Returns arts-based project collected narratives from 16 participants about their experiences of returning to education in order to study a creative subject. As part of this project the participants reflected on how previous experiences and job roles had benefited their return to learning.

In an attempt to pinpoint the skills that are often valued by educators and employers a range of recent reports related to employability were reviewed (National Centre for Universities and Business, 2024; Kingston University and YouGov, 2024; Wicklow and Gamble, 2024; British Academy, 2022; 2020; 2017) along with three frameworks that identify employability skills, two of these focus on the creative arts (Prospects, 2024; University of the Arts, London, 2024; Leeds Conservatoire, 2024). Core and transferable skills were identified and combined from all these sources to establish a comprehensive set of employability skills/aptitudes. The three aptitudes that were most often represented in the reports were creativity, adaptability and communication. This corresponds with the OCED (2021) report *Future of Education and Skills 2030* that argues that the more social, emotional and imaginative skills will be needed by employers as operational tasks become automated.

The stories about returning to arts education were analysed by referring to the comprehensive set of employability skills that had been identified from the literature. Explicit and implicit references to these skills were identified in the participants' stories.

The findings show how adult learning journeys in the creative arts are not necessarily linear but can be circuitous and iterative. They also suggest that education is not only a service for prospective employers but can prepare people for more imaginative and multifaceted careers that may or may not include partial retirement. For example, participants may have portfolio careers, that include part-time work similar to their previous job roles, alongside more fulfilling but precarious freelance work.

### **Context for skills and the creative arts in the UK**

For many reasons the cultural and creative industries have been deemed to be in crisis during the previous 10-15 years. Firstly, the impact of the English baccalaureate certificate (EBacc) on the uptake of arts subjects in schools has led to less people undertaking arts at A-level and subsequently to progressing to a creative arts degree. The introduction in 2011 of the EBacc has been detrimental to the arts because they are not seen as core subjects (Thomson et al. 2020; Bath et al., 2020; Fautley, 2019). Secondly, the impact of the pandemic led to a decline in arts and cultural activities which in turn led to a loss of skills through people leaving the creative industries. Easton (2020) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the creative industries and the pipeline of talent entering those industries. Thirdly, the Conservative government appeared to be hostile to the creative arts, suggesting that certain degree courses were of low value and threatening to limit the student numbers on these courses. Generally, there has been a growing and pervasive lack of understanding about the significance of culture and arts to the economy, local communities and to the well-being of individuals. Hopefully the recent changes in the UK government policy can give hope to those working in the cultural and creative industries.

Those who argue for the importance of creative education come from two schools of thought. Many believe that creative education is important in its own right and should provide the skills so that people can go and work in the arts and culture sector. Cole et al. (2024) discusses the potential for investing in arts and culture as a means of addressing many of Labour's policy goals. In particular they call for investment in skills for the heritage sector and the creative industries.

A second perspective is that a creative education can nurture important skills that can lead to employability in other sectors. Taylor et al. (2022) argue that the essential employment skills expected to be most in demand in the future labour market are those associated with creativity and sociability including analytical/creative; interpersonal; self-management; and emotional intelligence. Preparations that are

needed in education and training, and within the working population, to meet this demand. Therefore, the value of creative education also can lie in those transferable skills needed across all careers.

The Labour government elected in 2024 announced a £270 million funding boost for arts and culture. Along with the announcement it is noted that regional growth is to be boosted by £67 million for culture projects, these interventions are designed to support the *Government's Plan for Change*. The aim is to develop local engagement with culture and increase opportunities to gain creative skills, acknowledging the important role the creative industries have in the UK economy (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025a). The Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP (Culture Secretary) stated that,

*"Everyone across the country should be able to access arts and culture in the place they call home. This support will empower our cultural organisations to continue playing an essential role in developing skills, talent and high-quality careers in every corner of the UK".*

Creative skills can be learned from informal and formal learning opportunities. During recent times there have been many reports that argue for the importance of employability skills from graduate study. Many reports written by creative arts education providers seek to demonstrate how creative courses teach employability skills (University of the, London, 2024; Leeds Conservatoire, 2024). However, education is often represented as a machine where the output is a series of employability skills. Whilst an education in the creative arts seems well placed to provide the skills that can be applied to job roles, in both the creative industries and in other sectors, such an education is much more than a service to supply the "pipeline" into the job market. Also, the discourse is often about "young people". Nandy from the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport argues that,

*"Arts and culture help us understand the world we live in, they shape and define society and are enjoyed by people in every part of our country. They are the building blocks of our world-leading creative industries and make a huge contribution towards boosting growth and breaking down barriers to opportunities for young people to learn the creative skills they need to succeed".*

Where does this place those returning to education who are in their 40s, 50s, 60s and so on, who study creative subjects for many reasons? The barriers to studying the arts are compounded for adult learners, but for many, creativity is part of self-identity (Butcher and Clarke 2022). To what extent do these people return to education already with these employability skills and do these skills actually help them learn? So, this inquiry asks if it is possible to disrupt or reverse the thinking about the relationship between skills, education and employability in the case of adult learners.

## Research approach

Learning returns is an arts-based research project that has been developing over the previous five years since 2020. People who had returned to education to study the arts were asked to tell their stories and share their insights through a series of short films. These films were posted on a YouTube channel named Learning Returns. Arts-based methods can show how experience and meaning is complex and multidimensional. The arts can enable research communication to adopt multiple languages other than speech or writing, communicating in a multi-sensorial fashion. Words, images and sounds captured by film can convey meanings that are not limited to cognition but can also evoke feelings. Ways of knowing can include emotional, aesthetic and intellectual responses to the world and can heighten a researcher's grasp of human experiences.

Arts-based research is an approach that can delve into adult learning because it is "*research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience*" (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014: 1). Arts-based methods are an important means for researchers and participants to observe and reflect on their lived-experiences.

When considering the quality of arts-based research, validity, significance, reproducibility, reliability and exportable generalisations can often be meaningless when evaluating outcomes. Leavy (2015) identified a range of tenets that could act as quality indicators for arts-based research, such as authenticity, truthfulness, political consciousness-raising and emancipation.

## Recruitment

The University Alumni office contacted former adult learners who had returned to education later in life to study the arts asking if they wanted to be part of the Learning Returns project. At first, four people responded and gave informed consent. These participants had studied sculpture, calligraphy, socially engaged art and fine art. After the original four had contributed to the project they helped recruit a wider range of people. "*Snowball*" is a method of recruitment where participants are asked to suggest possible contributors from their networks. The four participants asked their contacts to email the researchers if they wished to be part of the project. Snowballing as a method of recruitment does have some issues as it is reliant on the social capital of the participants. Consequently, the snowball recruitment is effective in contacting "*hard to reach*" populations that researchers do not have access to.

The snowball recruitment approach was successful as from the original four, the number of participants increased to 16. In addition to this, the types of art subjects studied by the participants widened to include creative writing, printmaking, drawing and textiles.

## Method

Researchers organised with participants a time which was convenient to all parties when they could film content for a Learning Returns video [film and video are used as meaning the same thing for the purposes of this account]. Filming took place in various arts studios and classrooms at the University, and where a suitable backdrop could be installed and the sound levels from the surrounding environment could be controlled. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences of arts education as adult learners and how they had continued their arts practices outside of formal education. Approaches to lighting, seating and backgrounds were designed to frame the contributors as they spoke to the camera and to give a visual continuity to the films. The participants were reassured that if they were not happy with their performance at any time, then this could be edited out. They were encouraged to speak freely. The researchers aimed to keep the filming sessions relaxed and informal.

The subsequent footage was edited down from between 7-15 minutes of footage to approximately two minutes and the final versions were sent to the participants and research team for their approval. The editing process was iterative between the researchers in consultation with the participants. The editor kept in mind the need to capture the authentic stories of the participants, avoiding narrative smoothing where the authenticity of an account is compromised by the desire to “*tell a good story*”.

## Ethics

The safety and well-being of the participants were the first priorities of the project. The researchers shared with the participants the ethical risks of the films being hosted on YouTube and being visible to a world-wide audience. They were given an information sheet and consent form that explained the aims of the project, the reasons why the research was being undertaken, what participation entailed and the right to withdraw at any time. The channel was monitored to ensure there were no hostile comments posted, which would be removed (none have occurred so far). Participants can request the removal of their film at any time from the YouTube Learning Returns channel. Before filming began it was reiterated that the participant should think carefully about the public nature of YouTube before consenting. To mediate against any ethical risks only the first names of the participants were used and any professional information about their arts practices was only included at the participant’s request. The project gained ethical approval from the University’s Ethics Sub-Committee.

## Analysis

A range of recent reports were reviewed to identify key employability skills (National Centre for Universities and Business, 2024; Kingston University and

YouGov, 2024; Wicklow and Gamble, 2024; British Academy, 2022; 2020; 2017). Three additional frameworks were also drawn upon. They identified employability skills, two of these focus on the creative arts (Prospects, 2024; University of the Arts, London, 2024; Leeds Conservatoire, 2024). Core and transferable skills were identified and combined from all these sources to establish a comprehensive set of employability skills/aptitudes (see Table 1). The three aptitudes that were most often represented in the reports were creativity, adaptability and communication. This corresponds with the OCED report Future of Education and Skills 2030 that argues that the more social, emotional and imaginative skills will be needed by employers as operational tasks become automated.

A set of employability skills has been identified that is a combination from those mentioned in the reports. The list comprises: Reliability, Enterprise, Self-discipline, Creativity, Imagination, Originality, Critical thinking, Analysis, Decision-making, Problem-solving, Resilience, Adaptability, Communication, Listening skills, Organisation, Curiosity, Initiative, Management, Collaboration, Digital skills, Independence, Numeracy, Personal development. It is of note that many of the skills can be associated with creativity, emotional intelligence and communication and this is in line with other findings (Taylor et al., 2022).

These skills were employed as codes with which to analyse the Learning Returns videos. Two researchers watched the films independently, then met to agree with their findings. When a participant explicitly mentioned a skill in their account their comments were transcribed into a spreadsheet.

The research process can appear to be linear and occur in clear stages, for example, collecting data, analysing/interpreting the data and then writing up the findings. But often within arts-based research the process is often more iterative and/or cyclic. It could be argued that all the stages of the project involve some levels of analysis through reflection on the work-in-progress. In practice the analysis of the films was iterative, developed through a de-contextualising and re-contextualising cycle.

Prospects	National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) 2024.	The Kingston approach	Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy (SHAPE)	Creative Attributes Framework (CAF)	Leeds Conservatoire skills matrix	Combined skill set
Reliability						Reliability
Commercial awareness				Enterprise		Enterprise
Self-Discipline						Self-discipline
Creativity	Creativity	Creativity	Creativity	[Creativity implied]	Creativity	Creativity
	Imagination					Imagination
Originality						Originality
Critical Thinking	Mental flexibility	Critical Thinking				Critical thinking
Analysis		Analytical skills	Analysing			Analysis
Reasoning	Decision-making /judgement		Decision-making	Self-efficacy		Decision-making
Problem Solving		Problem solving/ process skills	Problem-solving			Problem-solving
Resilience		Resilience		Resilience		Resilience
Adaptability	Adaptability /flexible mindset	Adaptability	Adaptability	Agility	Adaptability	Adaptability
Communication		Communication skills	Communication	Communication/story telling	Written and verbal communication	Communication
					Listening skills	Listening skills
Planning					Organisation	Organisation
Research			Designing research and collating evidence	Curiosity		Curiosity
Leadership	Ability to act	Initiative		Pro-activity	Leadership	Initiative
Management						Management
	Emotional and social skills	Building relationships	Working with others	Connectivity	Teamwork	Collaboration
	Digital skills	Digital skills			IT skills	Digital skills
			Independence			Independence
					Numeracy	Numeracy
	Continual learning and development				Personal development	Personal development

Table 1: Collation of employability skills

## **Findings**

### ***Explicit skills mentioned by participants***

All the skills on the list were mentioned by at least one of the participants in their film. However, the most referenced skills were organisation, communication/listening skills and enterprise skills. The discussion of findings will focus on the three most referenced explicit skills mentioned by the participants. The discussion will then go on to consider those participants' skills which are implicit in the films or can be inferred from their stories even though they are not explicitly mentioned. Finally, it will be argued that there are skills which did not come up as employability skills in the frameworks, however, they were demonstrated by the participants and were seen to be helpful in their learning, these were having confidence; being reflective and being caring.

### ***Organisation***

The management of time when returning to learning is something that is important for all students but especially so when that student has other commitments. Ensuring that tasks are done on time and deadlines are met was seen by the participants as an important skill they brought to education from their work and life experience. Ann commented that she had "*been a manager, so I was used to organising people and organising my time*".

Frances saw a continuum with her past skills from her previous career being integral to her future aspirations. Within her account she shows how different skills are interrelated.

*"I haven't decided - but probably to continue doing the project management, but in a more creative field. Rather than - I was doing digital and telephony delivery, so it was all very technical. If I do project management again, I'd want it to be creative, so putting things on and organising things and being involved in that more creative environment"*

Frances demonstrates creativity and enterprise and planning what she wants to do after she has finished learning. She also is confident in her organisational skills and mentions digital and technical skills. She appears to have all these different competencies, but returning to education has allowed her to aspire to practice these in a creative context.

### ***Communication and Listening***

John thought about what skills he had brought with him that made his learning experience run smoother, "[from work life] *getting along with people and knowing*

*how to communicate with people.*" In art and design education there are a lot of learning tasks that involve teamwork and collaboration, so having good communication and social skills would be an asset. This is reinforced by Hafifa, who recalled that:

*"[during her studies] we'd sit and work together and talk about things that we liked. We'd have crit groups where we'd talk about and critique each other's work. And that really helped, having other students critique your work."*

Ingrid's comment again showed how communication skills sit with other capabilities

*"Listening and being able to offer advice were a main part of my role, but also being able to get anywhere on time and finishing things. Being able to stand up and teach as well, and prepare and make preparation for lessons and stuff like that."*

Ingrid makes the point that effective communication can also involve good time management, organisation and preparing what and how to speak to a particular group. Returning to learning with some experience of teaching could not only give insight into the structures and processes of learning but could also mean the student has empathy for the teacher, understanding the pressures and challenges from their perspective.

### ***Enterprise***

If enterprise is about identifying opportunities and using them to ones' advantage it can be seen that many of the participants had used their enterprise skills to get back into education. However, many had gained this from their previous work life and were applying them to their educational journeys. Anna showed her tenacity in building her career through recognising opportunities, *"I'd started my career in marketing - I'd done chartered institute of marketing exams and worked my way up through various companies and ad agencies."*

Gemma also talked about how she was building her connections. Like Anna, she is aware that sometimes building a business or freelance career takes time and involves being engaged in a diverse range of activities. Gemma commented that

*"I've got some work now through light festivals. I have continued to build my networks and use those networks, and I have been able to work in festivals, exhibitions and group exhibitions for the last few years."*

Ingrid had made enterprise the foundation of her previous job

*"I worked as a career consultant at a local university. I spent a lot of time advising people about their future careers and starting businesses."*

Which she recalled was knowledge and experience she was able to apply in her own learning journey.

By listening to the participants talk about their previous experiences and the skills they had gained from their employment it was clear that these were also useful skills for learning. The films showed that it might be better to think of a suite of skills that operate together, rather than breaking them down into individual competencies as is the approach taken by many reports on employability.

Within the films there were implicit references to skills in the stories told by the participants. As people who had returned to education, it was clear they were all engaged with decision-making. Going back to study as an adult learner means making complex and sometimes difficult decisions. They were also clearly interested in self-development, often to pursue their dream to be a creative practitioner. The participants clearly had good communication skills as they could tell their stories in an engaging manner. They were also able to target their messages to an imagined audience, who may be interested in returning to education later in life. Many of the participants talked about being creative before they returned to education. These implicit skills helped these students thrive and succeed in their chosen courses of study.

### ***Skills not referred to in the employability list***

When analysing the films, it became apparent that there were skills mentioned or enacted by the participants that had not been identified in the various frameworks as contributing towards employability. The first skill was confidence (something that can improve with practice), some of the participants thought they had the confidence to approach tutors and technicians with questions, of admitting they did not know something in comparison with their younger counterparts who were not always comfortable in doing that. Anna reflected on the confidence she had when starting her writing course, *“to shout up and send an email in to your tutor or your peers and instigate those conversations.”*

Secondly, many of the participants were reflective thinkers. They reflected on their experiences, their work, their course and themselves. John reflects that,

*“I felt that there were lots of people on that course like myself who were going through changes. Different ages, different stages in life. But we were all trying something to try and progress forward in the creative world.”*

This was close to but not quite the same as critical thinking. In the arts reflecting on one's own practice is an important activity that leads to improving the work. The stories that the participants tell where they reflect on their lives and identity their own strengths and weaknesses involve continuous reflection.

Thirdly, one participant talks about coming to education with a wish to care for people, another mentioned that they wanted to guide others. For example, Hafifa talks about setting up an art group to help people,

*“It's through National Health Charities where elderly Asian women, mainly from a South Asian background, are at home and they're isolated. This is a way of bringing them together through art.”*

Sally said she always had a caring disposition and it was this that motivated her to go into art therapy. Those caring, nurturing skills are not mentioned as employability skills, yet they are important when working with other people.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the crisis in the cultural and creative industries many commentators and researchers have sought to protect the arts' subjects in schools, colleges and universities by demonstrating the employability skills that can be gained by studying a creative subject (Ashton et al., 2023). Also, an argument is made that graduates with the correct skills are needed to fix the broken pipeline in to the creative industries.

Adult learners problematise the notion of a pipeline of skills serving the creative industries. Firstly, they are returning to education with many of the employability skills already. Their learning journeys allow them to capitalise on their capabilities while they are learning but also outside of education when they practice those skills in a new context and with a new focus. Some adult returners may work in the creative and cultural sectors, however, very often they are looking at enriching their lives as a whole. When looking towards retirement they may be seeking different modes of work that could be more flexible and part-time. They maybe more interested in setting up their own creative business, rather than serving an employer, where all their learning, life and work experiences can be drawn upon. They may mix paid and unpaid work together. The skills the adult learners have acquired throughout their lives are used to enable a better life for themselves and their families.

The participants' stories also show how creativity can be a suite of skills. To create something new in the world there needs to be organisation, reflection, critical thinking, problem-solving and curiosity. It would be an exaggeration say there is a causal link between art education and the skills favoured by the students surveyed (creativity, etc.), because similar skills can be found in other fields. They are probably characteristic of adults returning to education with a wealth of professional and life experience.

It is also interesting that some skills are high-lighted more than others. Confidence, reflection and caring skills are those which are valued by the participants, but do not seem to be recognised as those contributing to employability. The outcome of a list of skills springing from a course of study loses the contextual significance of practices that are much more than part of a creative machine. Adult learners bring with them skills that need to be understood in their complexity and how they contribute towards a good life.

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