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Politicians could help young people into creative jobs. Here's how

Martin Bright

If we can link up jobcentres with the creative industries - and boost diversity, then why can't politicians?

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'Independent evaluation of our pilot scheme demonstrated that 67% of attendees came from black and ethnic minority backgrounds.' Photograph: Philip Toscano/PA

Beyond the eye-watering spending pledges, it has been difficult to identify a single genuinely practical policy idea emerging from the major political parties in the election campaign. To be fair, snap elections do not provide the best platform for this kind of detailed work. But it would have been good to see some real thought being put into the future of welfare and work creation. The Institute for Public Policy Research reported this week that Britain now has the lowest level of support for poor people since the creation of the welfare state. The new model of welfare represented by universal credit was intended to further incentivise jobseekers. So where are the big ideas to address the future of work in the mid-21st century, particularly in the former industrial heartlands?

Two and a half years ago, I wrote in this column about plans by my charity, Creative Society, to set up a new kind of jobcentre. The model was relatively simple: to bring together young people and potential employers in an inspirational space to provide advice and guidance away from the “dole office” atmosphere of the traditional jobcentre. Working with Somerset House, in London, we provided drop-in sessions and opportunities to network with people from creative companies. The demand was overwhelming and it soon became clear that participants wanted to curate networking events themselves to showcase their talents. And so Creative Job Studio was born.

We knew that no one in the creative sector was recruiting from Jobcentre Plus and very few advisers and mentors in jobcentres had contacts in the sector. Our first-year pilot scheme, funded by Arts Council England, saw more than 1,700 people use the Job Studio. Independent evaluation by the Britain Thinks consultancy demonstrated that 67% of attendees came from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and 92% of participants felt more confident about pursuing a career in the creative industries after attending one of our events. A third of employers involved had never engaged or engaged less than once in six months with new, young and BAME talent.

According to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2 million people are employed in the creative sector and the creative industries contribute £101.5bn to the economy. The 2017 Bazalgette review estimated that figure would rise to £128bn by 2025. And yet it remains difficult to break into these jobs without family connections, or the ability to work for low pay or no pay for several years.

In place of the traditional middle-class networks of friends and family, we have built up our own structures of support, including an intensive system of personal mentoring and coaching. In this it has been important to work with far-sighted funders such as the Walcot Foundation and Trust for London, who understand that it is important to take risks and test new ideas. In my original article, I emphasised how important it would be to make the Creative Job Studio model work outside the capital. I was contacted by Laura Sillars, who was soon to take over as head of the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (Mima). We could not have hoped for a better collaborator. Since it was launched earlier this year, Tees Valley Creative Job Studio has taken on a life of its own.

In developing a model suitable for the north-east, we decided to tackle the root of the problem by working directly with Jobcentre Plus. By attending youth obligation sessions (as the name suggests, that unemployed young people have to attend to receive benefits) we have introduced local young people to the opportunities offered by creative jobs. Participants are planning their own event at Mima, which will allow them to learn transferable budgeting, administrative and project management skills. At the same time, young people in the Middlesbrough area will be working directly with artist Deb Covell on a retrospective and with local writer Laura Degnan to gain experience of the world of publishing. “It is important to mould and shape the Creative Job Studio to the place you are in,” says Helen Wickens, 27, who was signing on before securing an apprenticeship role at Mima in 2012 and then becoming a learning curator of the Tees Valley scheme.

Is it too much to hope for a politician of vision to take up an idea that brings together reform of the jobcentre system, promoting the creative industries and increasing access and diversity?

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