Too many schools and not enough jobs?

According to a recent BBC report, between 1995 and 2008, the number of young people going to university in the UK doubled from 20% to almost 40%. A degree is seen as the route to a higher standard of living and in 2009 more than 300,000 new graduates qualified and started looking for work. Evidently around 9% of them are still looking. So, say MELVYN TOMS and DAVID WARD from JAMES, it is not just the audio industry that seems to have a surplus of industry specific trained personnel.

Recent UK governments have been very keen to get more people through universities and they’ve seen this as essential to keep Britain ahead in the emerging technology race. Many colleges saw that Music Production and Music Performance courses were very attractive to students; a ‘sexy’ subject that would engage young people and keep them in education. There is nothing wrong with this in principle, as long as the educational aims are genuine and the students are not offered the promise of non-existent jobs. However, there have been some establishments that have used dubious marketing to swell student numbers and gain from subsequent funding advantages.

In the early 1980s there were only three or four institutions offering valuable and good quality training in the recording and audio fields. Now there are hundreds of courses available at every level. Further Education at colleges, Higher Education at universities, short courses run by private organisations and remote learning opportunities that are growing in number.

For many years, studio managers, producers and engineers have waded through an ever-growing pile of CVs and job applications, sometimes with sadness and often with great irritation. So are we training too many people for too few jobs? Our industry has complained for many years that there are way too many students graduating from Music and Media Technology courses compared to the vacancies that the industry envisages. Recent figures suggest that only 5% of graduating students find a career in their studied field. However, many people in our industry know that these figures are not accurate because they don’t take into account entrepreneurial postgraduates who develop and create their own businesses, related to their studies, very often pioneering new opportunities and approaches to traditional industry practices.

Of course, many students on audio and related courses decide that they do not want to work in a recording studio and they look for work in other parts of the music industry or in an entirely different industry. This phenomenon is not confined to our industry. Most students studying English literature will not go on to be authors, journalists or publishers. There is nothing wrong with a student following a dream to study and experience a subject that is dear to them, as long as they are not given false expectations about vocational possibilities, no matter how well intentioned or ill-informed the advice may have been.

The key to all of this is once again the value of the educational and learning experience that prepares a student for work in any industry not necessarily the one that they are directly studying. The value lies in the development of ‘life skills’ in communication, entrepreneurship and self-esteem as well as literacy, numeracy, IT skills and academic rigour. Interestingly what we do in our industry fulfils all these areas and this is being recognised more and more by educationalists.

Not that long ago a university education in the UK was free and the number of individuals passing through the system was relatively low. It was often felt that university was for the privileged parts of society. In some industries there were very good vocational and apprenticeship routes. If you wanted to learn a vocational trade, apprenticeship and day release study for Higher National Diploma’s and City and Guilds qualifications were for the working masses. Somehow vocational education was seen as inferior and academically less valid.

Things are very different today. Apprenticeship schemes have pretty much disappeared, although there are several brave attempts to reinvent them. Students and their parents now face the prospect of very high annual fees for university courses and this will result in students assessing the value of the courses they undertake very seriously. They will measure the quality of the learning against the cost and future prospects. Students will be charged up to UK£9000 a year for their courses.

The rights of students are being re-examined because they have now become ‘consumers’. Aaron Porter, president of the National Union of Students in the UK, said recently that students must have ‘increased rights and increased powers’ if they are to be charged up to £9,000 a year. He stated the need for students to move between universities if ‘misled by prospectuses’. He argued that the current model for monitoring the quality of teaching in universities would need to be radically overhauled.

So is there any point to an education if there is no guarantee of a good job at the end and what should students be looking for from a course? This is where the JAMES accreditation programme is important. The personal development of the student is so important and yet it is often overlooked. Most students will be standing on their own feet for the first time. Many will be moving away from home and dealing with basic life skills, shopping, cooking, housekeeping [or not in many cases] and budgeting [or not in many cases]. The measure of a good education experience is not only in the academic rigour and the practical knowledge, but also in the support needed in the development of the self-confidence and motivation to take advantage of emerging opportunities in a changing landscape. As well as equipping individuals with the key skills required by the workplace, they need the discernment and resilience to cope with the stress of rapid change throughout their working lives.

College and university courses will now have to cover academic and vocational aspects of learning and it will be essential that course developers and lecturers are constantly engaged with industry and constantly review their understanding of the current industry requirement and good practice. Many excellent courses have always done this.

Students will look for courses that provide a good fundamental understanding of the technology that they will encounter in industry and to get hands-on experience with current technology. They need to learn and understand the organisational structures and practices used in modern industry organisations. They will look for courses that cover a broad base of learning with the opportunity to develop specialised study options in later stages. As they develop their skills and academic understanding they may radically change their career aspirations as they discover new options unrealised or previously dismissed.

It is correct to say there are fewer large recording and postproduction studios now than 15 years ago but there are more small independent recording studios and record labels. There are emerging audio career opportunities in sound for picture and gaming platforms. Opportunities in live sound and theatre performances are increasing with the attendant need for skilled audio and technical practitioners.

There are now many music and sound related educational opportunities for young people and that is a good development. While many course leaders are aware of the changing job markets in our industry, there is still a lot of work to be done in this area, particularly in ensuring that lecturers and careers officers are aware of the realities. This is one of the roles of JAMES.

So how do employers, students and parents know which courses are good? Several years ago when studios needed to know which courses had content and expertise that matched industry needs JAMES created a robust course accreditation process and now many of the main recording, music technology, music production and audio postproduction courses display JAMES Accreditation Logos. Accreditation is the JAMES way of structuring industry support to educationalists and students, in the Higher Education, Further Education and Independent sectors.

Next issue we will explain how the accreditation process works and what the benefits are to educators, students, parents and the industry. ■