EXPLORING CREATIVE CAREERS

“Creative industries” is a concept that has inspired much enthusiasm over the past decade, both internationally and in New Zealand, where the film industry is the highest-profile example. Crossing the boundaries between “the arts” and “business”, the creative industries have been acclaimed as the source of a new generation of creative workers, more flexible workplaces, and opportunities for new, longer-term creative careers.

Two separate studies from Victoria Management School have set out to explore the experiences of those working in the creative industries. One research issue common to both projects is the question of whether traditional hierarchies, inequalities and perceptions of gender and ethnicity are present in the ‘new’ creative careers. This issue has attracted international interest.

Most study of creative industries has focussed on the economic aspects of innovation and changed work patterns. The VMS studies by contrast look at the experience of individual workers. Dr Sarah Proctor-Thomson’s PhD thesis Creative Differences: the Performativity of Gender in the Digital Media Sector examined the changing skills requirements, and shifting images of work and workers in the digital industries in the UK. Dr Deborah Jones and Dr Judith Pringle (from Auckland University of Technology) are lead investigators of Glamour and Grind: New Creative Workers, a three-year project for the Marsden Fund, which uses the New Zealand film industry as a case study to explore the work and identities of film workers.

In late June, the three New Zealanders will present a stream entitled “Unmanageable Inequalities: Gender and Power in the Creative Industries” at the 6th International Interdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Work and Organization, at Keele University. Later, they will join a round-table discussion on inequalities in creative industries at the Centre for Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King’s College in London. The expert forum has been convened to take advantage of their visit, and will gather an interdisciplinary range of scholars to address the same topics as the conference stream.

Creativity and knowledge

“Creative industries” are also known as “cultural industries” or “knowledge industries”, and may include advertising, architecture, design, digital media, fashion, film making, music, television, video games and even tourism – anything for which the raw material is described as creative.

The definition dates back to the late 1990s when the Tony Blair-led Labour government in Britain developed policies to foster innovation, collaboration, and new and productive ways of working. While the primary purpose was economic, to regenerate regions no longer used for heavy industry, social inclusion was also an important aim. There was an explicit intention to bring previously marginalised groups into the work force. With its connotations of freshness, inspiration, and the sweeping away of old limits and boundaries to tap a different set of human skills in a different way, “creative industries” became an irresistible idea, much copied around the world.
New Zealand, under its last Labour Government, was unique in adopting the creative industries idea from an agricultural rather than industrial base; and distinctive in deliberately linking it to the development of a national cultural identity. Creative industries were an extension of the Knowledge Wave; with its predominance of small and medium enterprises the New Zealand workplace lent itself to the concept of “cluster groups” for creative projects.

**Creative differences**

With a longstanding interest in inequalities at work, and how they might be redressed, Sarah Proctor-Thomson studied for her PhD at Lancaster University’s Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies. She arrived in the UK at a time when policies promoting creative industries were starting to gain traction. Some very confident claims were already being made about the transformation of the workplace into something “open, beautiful and inclusive,” Sarah recalled. The data did not bear this out. “The digital industries (such as information technology, digital film animation and web design) were held up as exemplary creative industries. But participation rates of women in that sector of the workforce hadn’t changed since the 1980s – and perhaps had even decreased.”

To find out how such competing and paradoxical ideas about the creative sector could arise, Sarah looked at policies, searched the literature and carried out a number of observations and interviews with female and male workers. “Work in the digital industries is engaging and seductive, and you hope that it would be open and equal,” she said. “But you soon recognise inequalities and see how they are perpetuated.”

Sarah’s thesis on *Creative Differences* examined the changing skills requirements, and shifting images, of work and workers in the digital industries. No longer the domain of “geeks” the sector now claims to recognise and value the importance of “difference” and “diversity” for creativity. Women are identified as “different” and therefore as potentially contributing to creativity. But at the same time they are distinguished from the most valued and idealised types of creative workers in the sector. “Women are seen as different, but not in the right way, and not in ways that are deemed to be individually creative,” Sarah concluded.

**Glamour and Grind: the Marsden Project**

The overall goal of *Glamour and Grind: new creative workers* is to develop theories about the identities and careers of ‘new creative’ workers, using the New Zealand film industry as the example. *Glamour and Grind* has been funded by the Marsden Fund, which itself is designed to support and encourage new thinking.

Deborah Jones and Judith Pringle are the principal investigators for the project, which is still in progress. It asks film workers how they see themselves and their careers as they develop over time. Their Associate researchers include Dr Keith Randle, Director, Creative Industries Research and Consultancy Unit, at the University of Hertfordshire; along with Ella Henry, senior lecturer from AUT, and Dr Rachel Wolfgramm from the University of Auckland Business School. Ella Henry and
Rachel Wolfgramm’s part of the project specifically investigates Māori perspectives on work in screen production.

New Zealand’s film industry is an excellent example of a “creative industry” – drawing on new sources of talent and new technologies to bring in global business, working in flexible and collaborative ways, and boosting not only the national economy but also national pride and even national identity, evidenced by the recent knighthood for Peter Jackson. *Glamour and Grind* explores what these developments mean for the daily reality and career prospects of the new creative worker.

“Film industry work combines traditional arts and crafts with new technologies and forms of entrepreneurship,” Deborah Jones said. “It includes subgroups from many types of creative industries, and overlaps with work in other creative media, so may suggest trends in a wider range of creative careers. People often work as free-lancers in a combination of jobs which make up a portfolio career.

“It has been argued that a ‘glamour’ factor attracts workers to creative careers, in spite of the ‘grind’. But the reality is that pay can be low, work precarious, and conditions tough.”

Preliminary findings and secondary data indicate that the New Zealand film industry may mirror other creative industries around the world in providing examples of less desirable and less innovative trends — the persistence of old-style workplace inequalities, and the introduction of new forms of exploitation.

“Some people in New Zealand in the film industry will tell you that it is a completely merit-based situation and everyone is equal as long as they have a good idea. But the facts and figures aren’t there [to prove the point either way yet],” Deborah said. New Zealand also differs from other western film industries in that film workers are not unionised, and there are debates about whether this creates poor working conditions or is a source of welcome flexibility and competitive advantage.

At the same time, “the Peter Jackson effect” has raised aspirations. People no longer see film-makers as condemned to a life of poverty: it is possible to make a lot of money as a film-maker – or least to make a living. On the other hand, some see themselves more as artists, and are uncomfortable with a creative industries framework that suggests that cultural activities must make money to be valued.

The researchers were interested to discover how far the success of the New Zealand film industry had become intertwined with national pride and identity – to the point where some saw any criticism, or emphasis on any negative aspect - that might put new global customers off coming to New Zealand - as almost treacherous. The recent controversy over a “Wellywood” sign for Wellington airport may be a welcome sign of a more critical approach from the general public.
**Relationships and power**

“As scholars of gender, work and organisation, we have an academic curiosity into this thing called creativity,” Sarah Proctor-Thomson said. “It’s very important to stand back and look beyond the hype and excitement about creative industries, and to look critically at what is new in the creative workplace, rather than just lamenting what is ‘the same old.’”

“If you can talk about inequalities, expose them, make it explicit how certain relationships happen, then you might have a chance to change things.”

“It’s important to analyse and identify how things are organised in order to maintain certain relationships of power, no matter what the frame is,” Deborah Jones said. “You can say ‘creative, creative’, as much as you like, but it won’t change anything.” In the UK, where there are stated policies, and good statistical data, Sarah could challenge the hype about how the creative industries had created a new, more equitable workplace, and the reality for workers. “In New Zealand it’s more difficult because there has been no explicit policy and hard data is scarce.”

Information about workplace relationships and how they develop will be explored in the stream they are convening at the June conference in Keele. At the conference, Deborah will present a paper on *New and persistent gender inequalities in the New Zealand film industry* and Sarah a paper entitled *Fitting workers for the changing digital industries*.

The enthusiastic international and interdisciplinary response to their call for papers for the “Unmanageable Inequalities” stream at the Gender, Work and Organization Conference shows there is widespread interest in this new field of study, Sarah said. Papers have come in from the US, the UK, Norway, France and Kazakhstan, as well as Australia and New Zealand.

“There’s a good distribution of different industries – architecture, music, film, digital media, advertising and museums,” Sarah noted. “When they are all clustered together, it may expose differences, or show similarities, across the creative industries.” A range of people with interest in gender policy will be attending. “People are coming from lots of different backgrounds – geographers, the humanities, economists, organisational psychologists.”

The Round Table discussion to follow is an opportunity to put the focus entirely on the issue of inequalities in the creative industries. Dr Rosalind Gill, the Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at the Centre for Culture, Media and Creative Industries, at King’s College in London, who has convened the event, is editing *Gendering the Creative*, which will be the first collected volume of work on the topic. She has invited some of the leading thinkers in the area, including policy-makers, and film and television producers as well as academics, to take part in a day of informal discussion that she hopes will “generate new research proposals, policy interventions, and ways of challenging a field that – although steeped in egalitarian discourse – is become more, rather than less, marked by inequalities.”