Research to inform policy from the University of York, School of Arts and Creative Technology

EMPLOYABILITY IN THE VIDEO GAMES INDUSTRY

Matching education to the needs of the UK's games industry

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Summary

- The video games sector is one of the UK's fastest-growing creative industries. In 2019 it contributed £2.8 billion to the economy and employed 27,000 people.

- The government wants to help create a million extra jobs in the creative industries by 2030, but studios say that games degrees are not producing industry-ready graduates.

- Games companies need to work more closely with universities, schools and careers services to help shape education and advise on which future technologies are needed to grow the industry.

- Higher education institutions should offer more support to lecturers on games-related courses.

- The government needs to ensure that information about the sector, relevant skills and career opportunities are available to potential workers when they are much younger, beginning in primary education.

Recommendations for policy

1. Future funding through bodies such as Innovate UK, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Creative Industries Council should be made available for skills development in higher education to allow teaching staff to: attend industry events, build networks in the sector, find out the current needs of the industry and its future direction.

2. UK careers services need to be streamlined and should offer a central resource that provides information about the games industry and career opportunities. Central resources should be created and maintained by an industry body such as ScreenSkills, TIGA or Ukie, and that body should make and maintain connections with UK careers services.

3. The national curriculum should include teaching about games at an earlier stage. Computer science has become a core part of the curriculum across the UK but it doesn't always include information specific to the video games industry.

4. Funded industry research is needed to establish current skills gaps, likely future skills gaps, and how to ensure that education addresses them.

Context

"We've actually worked with several freelancers that didn't do a computer games degree. What's critical for us are these communication skills, if you've got a portfolio, can you write software. But do they have a games degree? I don't think we've ever put that down as essential criteria."
– Lecturer and company director, independent company

The UK's video games sector emerged in the 1980s with a generation of 'bedroom coders' – these were mostly teenagers who programmed games from their bedrooms using home computers such as the Sinclair ZX Spectrum.

These coders had few academic qualifications and relied on informal networks to develop their skills – a practice that continues today (Ozimek and Rueda, 2022).

Unlike in the film and television industry, which has a tradition of film schools, the first games degree was launched only in 1997, and the value of degree courses for games is contested (Ozimek, 2021).

The number of games degrees is increasing: students are attracted to these programmes because they have grown up with games and want a career they are passionate about. They may expect to walk into a job at a Triple-A studio, because they don't realise how much competition they face or the realities of working in the industry.

Post-16 education, especially BTECs, has improved, and students who do vocational courses before their degree are likely to know more about the sector and have a more realistic understanding of their employment opportunities. But the video games industry is becoming increasingly important to the UK economy, and games education needs to improve at all levels if the UK is to maintain its position as European leader.

The government launched the Video Games Research Framework in 2023: it facilitates and promotes research on games and game-related technologies. Part of its purpose is to generate evidence to inform the development and growth of the video games sector.

Education and skills form a small part of the framework, but more action is needed to ensure that all aspects of education, not just degrees, support the games industry and give students the skills and knowledge they will need in the sector.

New Research and Evidence

Research on skills gaps/shortages and employment in the UK games industry tends to be included in broader overviews of the screen industries. As a result, data focusing on games is limited. This must be addressed if the needs of the games industry are to be truly understood.

Researchers at XR Stories and the Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) are looking at this and examining the make-up of the games industry and its working practices – see the 'Further reading' section at the end of this briefing.

Investment in the games industry and interventions in games education need to be based on academic research as well as engagement with industry. We need a research agenda that covers all areas of education (primary, secondary, tertiary and vocational) so that courses and programmes can:

Further Reading

See our report "Creativity Unlocked? Video Games and Television Work in Yorkshire During and Beyond the COVID Pandemic"

See our report "Organising Inclusive Informal Events in the Games Industry"

A new report titled: "Employability Expectations in the UK Video Games Industry" will be published soon

Further information

To find out more about the University of York's work on digital creativity, check out XR Stories, SIGN and the School of Arts and Creative Technologies:

- xrstories.co.uk
- screen-network.org.uk
- york.ac.uk/arts-creative-technologies

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