

Playing in the mud

The future of live events is threatened by a lack of technicians ...
Step up the new skills academy. Allan Glen reports

Allan Glen
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No Glastonbury festival, no Radiohead tours and no Brit Awards ... that could be the future of the live music business, according to research for the National Skills Academy for the creative and cultural industries, last year, which revealed the state of the overstretched live music industry in the UK. This has brought major opportunities both for the education sector and the live music industry.

However, one leading concert promoter warns there is potential for conflict in bringing together the heavily regulated education sector and a notoriously maverick industry. "A lot of live music companies are very small, with few staff but lots of passion," says Geoff Ellis, director of DF Concerts, the company behind T in the Park festival and the Glasgow venue King Tut's Wah Wah Hut. "What you don't want is someone breezing in waving a degree and telling everyone how to do their job."

It was frustration at the bureaucracy in education that led Chris Hill, director of Wigwam Acoustics, to launch the company's Charlie Jones sponsorship programme at the School of Sound Recording in Manchester, despite a lack of official accreditation. "All the CVs we receive from kids on music courses go straight in the bin," says Hill. "Our programme at least allows students to be taken seriously by prospective employers."

At Buckinghamshire New University, balancing the ambitions of students with the demands of the live music industry is in the hands of Frazer Mackenzie and Andy Reynolds, who both have years of experience in the business.

Live music management degrees

The university started offering degrees in music management and production in 1995, and was the first higher education provider in Europe to do so. "If the industry feels graduates leave university without the necessary skills, it should contribute more actively to the education process," says Mackenzie. "For us, the key is to produce graduates who can hit the ground running."

Reynolds, who splits his time between university and life on the road as a tour manager, says the live event production industry is very sceptical of graduates. He adds: "Graduates are often not prepared for the reality of what they will be doing, which is cleaning mud off speaker boxes that have been at Glastonbury for a week."

The government's response to the problem has been to speed up the opening of the National Skills Academy (NSA) for live entertainment, and the announcement on February 22 by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport that it is to launch a new creative apprenticeship scheme. This aims to provide up to 5,000 formal apprenticeships a year by 2013 through partners such as Universal Music Group. The NSA is due to be rolled out nationally this year, and will concentrate on providing courses in lighting, audio and backstage skills.

Supervised by Creative and Cultural Skills, the sector skills council for the creative and cultural sectors, the scheme's cost is now estimated to be £12m with industry expected to contribute £4m. Qualifications offered will include the new creative apprenticeship being developed by Creative and Cultural Skills with specialist "pathways", including

technical theatre, live events, and promotion and music business skills.

The academy should open nationally in September 2008 with about 125 employers who are supporting the NSA bid, working with FE colleges and schools to develop industry-led careers advice and guidance. The main academy building in Thurrock is due to open in autumn 2009. It's hoped the NSA will be training up to 2,000 people annually from 2009.

Tom Bewick, chief executive of Creative and Cultural Skills, welcomes the latest strategy. "The government is pledging to create 5,000 creative apprenticeships per year by 2013. This is going to be a very challenging ambition to meet. It will require a huge employer-led campaign across the creative industry, backed by government resources, to change the pattern and culture of recruitment into industry, which is predominantly at the graduate level.

"However, these apprenticeships will be crucial for meeting skills needs, unleashing real talent and, crucially, diversifying our workforce."

As education liaison manager for Yamaha Music UK, Bill Martin believes the National Skills Academy has a role to play in furthering live music through education. "While many teenagers aim to be professional musicians, few set out to be professional stage managers or lighting engineers," says Martin, who launched the website yamahaeducation.co.uk this year for those working in music education.

Geoff Ellis also supports the NSA: "Some people may think education will sanitise rock'n'roll, but in important areas such as health and safety there is room to learn in a classroom environment."

Skills partnerships

While the NSA has its supporters, it also has critics: "There are plans for the National Skills Academy to engage in partnerships with regional education providers, but the details of these arrangements remain to be seen," says Mackenzie. "One of the big benefits higher education establishments can bring is a track record in designing, delivering and validating education and training for many years."

This is a view backed up by Reynolds: "The NSA is a waste of money. How are you going to attract a potential technician from Belfast or Aberdeen to Thurrock? The various higher education, further education and private courses around the country need pulling together to create regional centres of excellence."

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