

House of Commons Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee

Inquiry into post-pandemic economic growth: UK Labour markets

ALCS is a not-for-profit organisation, with over 116,000 members, which collects and distributes money for licensed secondary uses of authors' and writers' works from around the world, with £40m paid out in the last year and over £600m since its foundation in 1977. At Westminster, it also provides support for the All-Party Parliamentary Writers Group (APWG).

We welcome this inquiry into UK labour markets as an organisation that represents over 116,000 writer members who have experienced difficulty over the past three years and are continuing to adjust to the current working environment. We have seen a fundamental misunderstanding by the Government of self-employed and freelancer work particularly in the creative sector. This inquiry provides the Committee the opportunity to provide some insightful recommendations which will mean moving forward we can make meaningful and reasonable adjustments to UK working life and law that is inclusive of different job types and patterns.

In this response we address the current skills shortages within the creative sector along with how apprenticeships can be used as a pathway to widen access to workers from all backgrounds into the arts. We also discuss the impact AI will have on the creative workforce and the appropriate way for new technologies to be used that will not be at the expense of writers and content creators.

The state of play in the UK labour market post-Brexit and the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on recruitment, skills shortages and the growth of the labour market

Q1. Do we have enough workers with the right skills in the right places?

Q2. What more can the Government do to ensure that employers are able to recruit people with the right skills for the job, including the effective use of apprentices?

1. Writers span across the breadth of the creative sector, whether that be from journalists to screen writers to stage shows. This makes quantifying skill levels and shortages difficult but there is significant evidence covering different industries which tells us important information about the shortages facing writers currently.

2. The British Film Institute produced a piece of research in June 2022 reviewing workforce development in the scripted film and high-end television production sector. It reinforced many of the skills points made by other research organisations – that we are haemorrhaging skilled workers and there is still a lack of education around the different roles available within the sector.

3. A few key points identified were “Bridges from education to industry” and more “comprehensive and well published career pathways”.

4. In terms of Bridges from education to industry, university education around the arts has been the subject of funding cuts over the past four years, with the Department for Education changing what is deemed as 'strategically important subjects' from 2019. This change is not reflective of the appetite for arts courses amongst prospective students and already is having a damaging impact on writers' possible education routes.

5. Universities have begun to cut arts and humanities courses as a result of this - University of Wolverhampton is suspending all recruitment for performing arts courses and Sheffield Hallam University will be cutting its English Literature course from 2023.

6. The process behind calculating whether a course holds or contributes value currently incorporates how quickly graduates enter employment post-university and their starting salaries. Universities UK have stated that focusing predominantly on one measure of value can have negative unintended consequences on the future of higher education courses, the more effective way is to measure more widely by taking a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data.

7. Under the current strategic calculations, it poses a real risk to the future makeup of the creative workforce and the levels of skilled workers within it. Initial higher education course offerings are shrinking for burgeoning writers which is making the bridge from education into employment accessible to a smaller and more privileged group within society, having a knock-on impact onto the stories we see emerge onto the bookselling and entertainment market.

8. Looking at more comprehensive and well published career pathways ALCS ran a project with the regional writing agency New Writing North in March 2022 on working class writers' knowledge of how to enter the writing sector. During a parliamentary roundtable with industry experts from publishing houses and broadcasters as well as writers themselves – a reoccurring point raised by all was the availability of information on career pathways to becoming a writer.

9. This lack of transparency on how to enter the industry means that without the social connections in place prior to writing, it can feel as though it is impenetrable. The Committee should consider recommending greater information sharing practices and education around routes into writing.

Q3. What impact has the UK's departure from the EU had on the flow of workers into and out of the UK? Are there particular sectors or skill sets that are most impacted?

10. It has been widely catalogued that musicians and performers have been jeopardised by the restrictions on worker flow as a result of Brexit, this difficulty and the low wages of the industry have put skilled workers within the creative industries at risk of leaving. The creative sector is experiencing a talent drain at the moment with diversity also being thrown into the firing line.

Q4. Which sectors are experiencing the most acute shortages of workers since the pandemic? Have there been structural changes in the labour market post-Covid?

11. The impact that Covid has had on creatives wages in the industry has meant that the sector is currently experiencing a talent drain which is only likely to get worse with the cost of living rising. Creatives typically have sporadic income streams due to invoicing with companies for piece meal work and in the case of authors – earning on a project by project basis as well as having various income streams.

Q5. What more can the Government do to ensure that employers are able to recruit people with the right skills for the job, including the effective use of apprentices?

12. The difficulties around usage of the apprenticeship levy has been a widely talked about point within the arts – we have a creative industry full of employers willing to engage in skills training but lack the ability to access the appropriate routes to do so, 44% of employers in the creative sector felt they were not meeting their training needs and wanted to do more according to PEC. Writers' and employers alike will benefit from having a range of further education qualifications open to them.

13. The creative sector has appreciated the recent loosening on guidelines with the creation of portable and flexible apprenticeships. ALCS is committed to pushing for greater skill opportunities for writers in the creative and education sector and will work with the necessary organisations to push for the creation and expansion of the apprenticeship offering.

14. This will aid on multiple different policy levels; it will act as a more inclusive and accessible way into the industry as a writer which as we know is suffering from a loss of diverse talent and therefore less diverse story telling.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and technology in the workplace

Q7. How is AI currently being used in the workplace? Is it more prevalent in some sectors than others?

Q9. How should the Government protect workers and prepare them for this new future?

15. Artificial Intelligence is reliant on a wide range of human inputs, whether that is from the human programmers of the software or the content used as inputs to “teach” an artificial intelligence. Ultimately the human input remains and human authors must still be acknowledged for their work as writers, artists, composers, and producers. Artificial Intelligence should not be seen as a new actor that replaces authors, whose work is still being used, just in a different way to other media.

16. In its current form, the Government's recent proposal to amend copyright law to permit a broad allowance for commercial text and data mining will prejudice the rights of creative workers, such as writers. A more balanced approach is required that allows firms to mine copyright works to train and develop AI systems while at the same time recognising and rewarding the rights of creators, whose work underpins and drives the economically steadfast creative industries.

17. The approach to AI should not be to supplant creators with AI. This would have a devastating impact for a range of reasons, it would deal significant harm to the large creator communities our creative industries will, as a matter of fact, continue to rely on.

Workers' rights and protections

Q10. How can the Government improve employment rights, following Brexit and the covid-19 pandemic?

Q11. How can the right balance be struck between the flexibility the UK economy needs and protections for workers?

Q12. What can the Government do to improve protection for people in low-paid work and the gig economy?

18. There needs to be a greater understanding of the way the self-employed market within different sectors functions – we saw during the pandemic that the Government's ability to make suitable provisions for the self-employed portion of the workforce was lacking in the extreme.

19. Self-employment in the creative sector runs at over twice the national average. Of the 2.1 million in the creative industries, 33% (694,000) are self-employed and almost 50% (332,000) of the 676,000 in culture, compared to 15% (5 million) in the country as a whole. Over 20% of the UK's self-employed, therefore, work in these sectors.

20. ALCS heard from its members that during the pandemic, strict and unchanging eligibility criteria for income support meant that many creative freelancers and writers were unable to access this much needed support and security necessary to their livelihoods.

21. Creative UK identified that creative freelancers in London lost up to 60 per cent lost all their work during the pandemic and at least 200,000 self-employed Londoners were excluded from Government support. The pandemic also highlighted existing inequalities facing creative freelancers – including a lack of security at work, unequal access to freelance opportunities, and a lack of basic safety nets.

22. We would ask the Committee to recommend that the Government, therefore, establish a dedicated channel for engaging with the creative freelancer workforce in the form of a Freelancer Commissioner. This would include not only writers, but also visual artists, performers, directors and designers. A Commissioner would champion the vital role freelance, self-employed and atypical workers play across the creative and cultural sectors while identifying and finding solutions to unintentional systemic challenges that they face.