

# (IN)VISIBLE ENTREPRENEURS: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE USE THE URBAN MUSIC ECONOMY TO CREATE WORK AND GENERATE WEALTH

**Dr Joy White** *ISRF Independent Scholar Fellow 2015-16*

*NOTE: The Independent Scholar Fellowship application form has been updated since this proposal was submitted.*

## **Abstract**

My thesis contends that the NEET category obscures the significant impact of the accomplishments of those who operate in the informal creative economy. Grime music, a black Atlantic creative expression, is used as a lens through which to explore and analyse the nature of entrepreneurship within this sector. East London, a site of poverty, movement and migration is the geographical starting point for the project.

Over a five-year period from 2007 – 2012, ethnographic field research was carried out in London and Ayia Napa, Cyprus. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in the sector. In addition, participant observation was undertaken in various settings including pirate radio stations, nightclubs and music video shoots.

The global reach of those who operate within the urban music sector has a significant socioeconomic impact. Practitioners utilise advances in technology as well as innovative business practice to create opportunities for self-employment on a local, national and international scale. Grime music and its related enterprise culture is a mechanism for social and economic mobility particularly for those from ethnically stigmatised communities.

My original contribution to knowledge is an ethnographic critique of the concept of the NEET using case studies of Grime music and it offers a way to explore the education, employment and training that people in this NEET category are engaged in.

The findings disrupt existing strategies to deal with youth unemployment and argues for a reworking of existing policy initiatives for tackling youth unemployment, and the NEET issue, to take into account actual activity, rather than imagined inactivity.

**The Research Idea** *The innovative thesis of the project*

I would like to prepare a monograph for publication based on the five year ethnographic research project that I have completed. Details of this are outlined in the abstract.

My research is concerned with the invisible entrepreneurs participating in the informal creative economy in east London. Invisible because, to borrow a phrase from Loic Wacquant, they belong to a stigmatised community, in this case, they are young, black and poor (Wacquant 2007). Furthermore, poor young people are often categorised as NEET, that is aged between 16 and 24 and Not in Education, Employment, or Training (Chandler & Barrett 2013).

The NEET category disguises and obscures the significance of the diverse range of activities, achievements and accomplishments of those who operate in the informal creative economy. The inherent contradictions and questions that emerge from an exploration of the Grime music scene, in particular, allows for a more complex reading of the socio-economic significance of urban music. In this research project I take more than a hurried glance at constructions of entrepreneurship in a sector that traditionally has had little attention from the academy (Wacquant 2007). I negotiate the woven complexities of how this economy operates and examine the ecology that enables a certain mobility and reinvention of the practitioners to take place. This transformative aspect of participation in the urban music economy is also an underexplored area within the academy.

### **Background** *Current research reference points and their limitations*

In east London, the informal creative economy is a repository for young people who are categorised as NEET. Grime music is a cornerstone of the urban music economy and it has broken free of its east London origins to have a global presence. The organising framework for this project is Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic, particularly as it relates to the transnational and borderless flow of black creative expression such as Grime (Gilroy 1996). Grime music, a black Atlantic creative expression, is used as a lens through which to explore and analyse the nature of entrepreneurship within this sector. East London, a site of poverty, movement and migration is the geographical starting point for the study.

The national and global reach of those who operate within the urban music sector has a significant socio-economic impact. Practitioners utilise advances in technology as well

as innovative business practice to create opportunities for self-employment on a local, national and international scale. Grime music and its related enterprise culture is a mechanism for social and economic mobility particularly for those from ethnically stigmatised communities. I contend that the activities of these individuals disrupts the accepted interpretation of NEET as a category of deficit and proposes a reconfiguration of current definitions regarding who is an entrepreneur and what constitutes entrepreneurship.

**The Focus** *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

In the United Kingdom almost one million young adults are unemployed and tackling the NEET problem has remained a key youth policy since 1997 (MacDonald 2011, p.430). The global recession that began 2008 and continued until 2009 combined with the subsequent economic slowdown contributed to unemployment in the UK rising to levels that had not been experienced since the early 1980s.

However, young people from impoverished backgrounds moving between unemployment and low paid, poor quality work or training schemes, is not a novel situation. It comes out of a long term pattern that has been the lived experience for previous generations of older workers from poor areas (Shildrick et al. 2010). What has changed now is that the low paid, therefore, lesser quality work that is still available requires increasing levels of qualification.

Therefore, those that do not acquire the necessary standard of qualification are more likely to be excluded from the world of work. For the young this means that they are less likely to make the transition into adulthood. Reducing the numbers of those who are classified as NEET therefore has been a key youth policy for successive governments during the last fifteen years (Shildrick et al. 2010; LSN 2009; Lee & Wright 2011; A. Cunningham 2012). Youth unemployment, while it had been a matter of concern in the UK since the last instance of mass unemployment in the 1980s, became a more pressing political issue with the global financial crisis in 2008.

**Theoretical Novelty** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

Far from being a highly localised, niche creative practice, the act of creating Grime music propels its practitioners out into the world and away from 'the ends' or impoverished urban areas. How the informal creative economy co-exists with, and is embedded within, the formal sector and how practitioners apply their informal learning

in practice is explored by using Ayia Napa as a case study. How music and its by-products have enabled markets to be created and developed and primary and secondary business activities to take place is examined in detail with particular reference to those categorised as NEET.

From the fieldwork undertaken in London and Cyprus, entrepreneurial activity in evidence included; an online TV channel, music video production, clothing lines, a SIM card for a mobile phone network, record labels, event promotion and an internet radio station. The perceived split between formal and informal economy is empirically examined within the context of the urban music economy. The significance (or otherwise) of formal learning and educational attainment of those within the sector are examined.

By highlighting the types of business activities that are in evidence and the significance, if any, of educational attainment, this project challenges notions of entrepreneurship by foregrounding a sector that traditionally has had little attention from the academy. It negotiates the woven complexities of how this economy operates and examines the ecology that enables a certain mobility and transformation of the practitioners to take place.

**Methodology** *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

My research project had three key objectives; firstly, to identify existing formal qualifications, secondly, to explore the learning choices of those within the sector and the learning opportunities within the urban music economy and finally to identify ways to harness the skills, talents and energy of these participants and translate that into formal qualifications and legitimate business pursuits.

The research question therefore lent itself to an ethnographic approach as it is primarily concerned with the experience of being in and participating in a particular social world – in this case the informal urban music economy. Key examples of ethnographic practice informed the research design and sampling strategy.

The methodology used consisted of a literature review, internet research, semi structured interviews, participant observation and the collection and archiving of

selected merchandise and promotional material. As well as a library of photographs, I also have 'behind the scenes' film footage of a model shoot, a pirate radio station as well as two music videos. I have created a forty minute film documenting the urban music scene in Ayia Napa, Cyprus – 'Making it Funky' (White 2013b). Forty interviews were carried out over a five year period with respondents who are involved in the most common aspects of the urban music industry: artists/performers, event promoters, sound engineers, music producers, models and filmmakers.