

Is Recording Engineering?

Focus group discussion with students at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA)
27th April 2012
Transcription

About fifteen people were present at this event: Jez Wells (University of York) who led the discussion students on production/sound recording degree programmes at LIPA. Students are listed anonymously as S1, S2 etc. As this is a transcription from an audio recording of the event it has not been possible to identify those who spoke more than once with the same anonymous label (hence there are more labels than people who were present). However, it has sometimes been possible to identify one speaker with more than one comment and in these cases the same label is used.

Jez: The first thing that I want to ask you is about the identity of the recording engineer. I think it's a bit of a big question to delve into straight away, so let's focus on recording engineering at the moment. We can branch that out into sound engineering and live engineering after that. What is a recording engineer? Is a recording engineer closer to being a scientist and an engineer or are they closer to being a musician? Are they a musical technician or a technical musician?

S1: it depends if they're producing as well as opposed to just solely recording.

Jez: Yes, it does depend on that. I think you've hit on one of the key issues straight away, which is the extent to which they produce the recording. So, that opens up the next question: what does a producer do? What is it a producer does that is solely production? Because then we can get an idea of when the person who is making the recording is being an engineer and when they are being a producer. Has anyone got any ideas on what the producer does?

S2: The idea of attempting to succinctly to find what a producer is such an amorphous thing. I think trying to sum up what is the skill set an enormous breath of people from a variety of backgrounds within an enormous amount of musical contexts, I don't think you can do it to be honest.

Jez: It's going to be hard work and it's not the kind of thing we can write down on one page.

S2: It runs from someone who has no direct involvement but makes artistic calls to people who have arranged the music through to Steve Albini, who would reject the idea of being a producer but you could reasonably describe him as one.

Jez: I agree with you that trying to nail these things down and trying to come up with some kind of pamphlet is not going to be possible, but by talking about them and by using those two examples you've given we can begin to sketch out what the skill set of the producer might be and what it might be for an engineer. Can you just run through those two examples again? You seem to say that those two examples were two ends of the spectrum.

S2: Actually I think that's quite a poor juxtaposition. It's more like, say, Steve Albini, who prides himself on not getting credits on records: he considers himself just a facilitator of a band's artistic

vision and strictly describes himself as a recording engineer but by the fact that there is no producer on the sessions he is the de facto producer of those recordings.

Jez: So he likes being the hidden agent?

S2: He has this whole thing about describing yourself as a producer and imposing your yourself on a band is almost artistic arrogance. But by default he is the producer because if they went in with somebody else and they produced it the difference between those two recordings is what could be accurately described as his production.

Jez: OK, so his production is non production. His 'hands on' is 'hands off'.

S2: It's all getting very philosophical!

Jez: Yes, it is! And a lot of this is going to feed into, and be informed by, the philosophy of engineering and the philosophy of what goes on in the studio. And it can lead people to wonder 'well is this going to be of much practical use?'. I hope so, because despite the fact that there are these difficulties that you describe you guys, for example, are all here on a course and you are hoping to take away some skills from that course, so that implies that there are going to be some things which are generally or typically useful: some knowledge and some techniques, even if they don't apply to every single situation. OK, one thing on Steve Albini and then we'll move on: who decides whether a particular take is good enough in that situation: is it the band that he's recording?

S2: I don't actually know.

Jez: Does anyone else know? One of the problems, of course, is that unless we actually sat in on these sessions ourselves or the people involved give interviews in which they provide truthful details about what happens then we can never know.

S2: The impression that I get is that he doesn't labour over getting takes out of people because they do albums really fast, like albums in 10 days. So you don't really have much time.

S3: I think it's more that he just wants to capture what's there and then, rather than sculpting and moving, but then as much as he says he isn't a producer and doesn't put his impact on it surely the lack of impact is an impact?

Jez: Yes, the 'non sound' is the 'sound'.

S2: It's getting very John Cage [laughs].

Jez: Yes it isn't it! Would it be fair to describe him as a rock producer?

S3: Just by the nature of his output, yes, I suppose.

Jez: OK what about pop music? There are some people that would say there is quite a difference between rock and pop music. Pop music is seen as synthetic and constructed, it was never part of a live performance, whereas rock music is still built around the concept of a bunch of musicians performing together at the same time, using instruments that we would recognise. So does that mean that the producer for pop music is different to the produce of a rock music?

S4: Probably, yes. Because they are going to have set goals to achieve.

Jez: So the pop producer is going to have a sound in mind?

S4: Yeah and he's also going to have people above him saying 'we need to achieve these sales by this date, we like what this song has achieved in the charts, we need you to do that'.

Jez: So, another key element here is that very often the producer is the person that the record company put in charge to make a success out of, transform, or whatever it is, if it's pop music maybe someone who is good looking with maybe half a voice; awesome, great production knick-knacks or whatever or it might be a rock band who can really get a crowd going at a gig but have never been in a studio before and the producer is the person who's got to take that raw material, in whatever form it is, and turn it into some kind of product which is going to sell, ultimately.

S5: You can make an analogy to the film industry, saying that the producer is more like the director of a film. In that case the engineer is like the camera operator...

S6 interjects: 'cinematographer'

S5: ...in a way, at the end of the day it's the producer's decision, it's the producer's vision which is the artistic vision of the recording, and it's basically the engineers job to capture it in the way that the producer tells him to.

Jez: I think that's a good analogy and you mentioned the word cinematographer so there's already a difference there, because we've got the camera operator and we've got the cinematographer.

S5: If we're speaking just about the recording itself like the act of recording, not mixing.

S7: I think that role gets blurred though when you start moving into a pop genre. When you've got a band you do need that sound engineer to capture the sound, that knows audio that knows sound, and understands what technical equipment they are using to capture what they want from that, whereas in the pop genre the role of the engineer almost doesn't exist because most of it is samples and synths, but then I suppose there's an argument to say that the producer, or the creator in that sense, that's making that track is still engineering, it's just in a different form, it's not recording sound in a sort of an organic way: it's creating and sculpting sound.

S8: It seems like within the pop context producers have the capacity to be pretty non-technical because you could just basically be really good at [Apple] Logic but that actually opens up a gap in

the market for guys who are vocal engineers who are just really slick at doing and running vocal sessions.

S5: But is that engineering?

S8: well, yes, because at that point you just get really, really good at that.

S5: What is it that makes a really good vocal recordist? It's getting good takes and giving good musical direction to the singer.

S9: And also understanding the voice and what you're putting in front of it to capture it.

S8: And being sufficiently quick at problem solving to the point where it is never an obstruction to the process. So let's say you turn up and you're getting clocking issues between interfaces but you can solve it within 15 seconds rather than holding up the session.

Jez: What about if, in the vocal sessions, the producer says 'I want a different vocal sound' but they use non-technical language? They say 'I want the vocal sound to be punchier or I want the vocal sound to be rawer'? Is the person who is putting the microphones on the stand and running the technical aspects of the session [an engineer]? If they are then turning that into a sound is that what you mean by someone who is good at running vocal sessions, because they're able to interpret those kinds of descriptions and turn that into a set of technical procedures which then creates this improved vocal sound and the producer then goes 'that's it, you've nailed it!'.

S10: Presumably you're trying to isolate the fact that engineering isn't purely a technical role: it's having to translate the kind of intangible subjective elements into...yes, I suppose so. There isn't any job in audio where it's purely technical.

Jez: No, and I suspect in lots of other fields there are no jobs that are purely technical. I'm sure you're aware that many people consider that there is a huge amount of personality involved in working in a studio: being able to get along with people and helping people to rub along together smoothly is a very coveted skill. I think that's probably due to the fact that everybody has to spend long hours locked in windowless rooms and soundproofed booths with each other for long periods of time. It's a bit like being on board a submarine, albeit perhaps with a bit more space, and so it's very critical in that situation, but in other roles as well, it's probably critical that the people can get on with each other. So, who are those here who see themselves, or would like to see themselves, as ending up in a role which is more leaning towards the producer side of things? OK, so about half the people here have their hands up I'm going to assume that that means the other half in here see themselves moving towards roles closer to engineering. Is there anybody here who is studying this stuff because they want to do something quite different from any of those things? There's an assumption, I think, that people are always here because they want to do either production or engineering, But, occasionally people are doing this, for example, because they are an artist and they want to understand what it is that people are going to be doing with them, or doing to them, in the recording session. So, there's around about half and half: of either of those groups, has anyone got any really strong reasons for why they want to be either one or the other?

S5: I think I want to be a producer rather than an engineer because I want to have impact on the music and I think that ,as an engineer, you are not part of the creative process, which is what I'm about.

Jez: The recording happens because you are there but the sound of it has nothing to do with your input?

S5: Well, I'm in the pop side of things so I kind of do everything.

S6: The producer gets royalties.

Jez: Yes, you are more likely to get points as a producer than you are as an engineer. That's the first time anyone in any of these focus groups has said that, but of course it's an incredibly important point.

S11: In rock recording you get between 3 points and 5 points.

S12: The thing is you get your 3.9 points for 'track and mix' but unless your record sells a substantial amount or unless you've negotiated a good deal in the way of the royalties are paid against the cost the artist has to recoup, it's not really going to mean anything. Your initial payment is going to be far more valuable, unless you are recording U2 and you are guaranteed to shift a million copies.

Jez: But you are going to be interested in points, I guess, if you feel that the impact that you can have on the project you are working on is such that that's going to push it up above that threshold.

S12: Yes but I hope that your motivations for producing a good piece of work went beyond just physical recompense.

Jez: It's a difficult one isn't it? To get the gigs in the first place with working for record companies, who as I mentioned earlier want us to turn raw materials into a refined product, but of course you want to do things which are of artistic interest to you and of merit to other people.

S13: Some of us want to get into post-production and, effectively, some of that is just recording vocals for an advert or something, so there's no creative aspect: you are just solely there to record with a team of people who want something out of this advert or short piece or something like that. You're not going to be there saying 'I think we should say this', instead you are just there doing a job and recording.

Jez: So, you are in a vocal booth which you would always use for that kind of work, there is a microphone which is always on that stand in that position, there's almost an 'x' marked on the floor where the vocal artist goes and stands and you switch the console on and you get a record level and you go for it. And so that, for you, as a post producer you're doing that at the tail end of the production process, so that you're then ready to go on do the things that you do in post-production.....

S13: Yes.

Jez:...and does that overlap with the kind of thing that happens at the mix down the stage for other people?

S14: I think in post the recording process is a lot more like engineering, the abstract idea of engineering, in that you are doing it to obtain these recordings. Sometimes it's a creative thing that you are doing but especially in the case of recording vocals you are there to get a clean recording. It's very technical, it needs to be at the right level, it needs to be clear and then, later on, when you're more in the mixing process you can start to move it o, but I think in post if you're putting sound effects on and stuff you need to keep it clean so that you can then affect it later as opposed to doing it whilst engineering the recording process.

Jez: You mentioned there the definition of the traditional concept of what an engineer is. if I was to say to any of you 'what is an engineer? Let's say that someone from a completely different part of the world, a completely different culture, that doesn't have the word 'engineer' says to you 'I keep hearing this word engineer', and I'm not talking about it in relation to recording at the moment, I'm talking about it in general: what is an engineer? Has anybody got any succinct definitions.

S5: I don't know I just know that the stuff they study at university is a lot more complicated than what we study [laughs] because they deal with mathematics and physics so much and we just touch it a little bit, which is why I think it's fair to say that we are not really engineers, just in the context of the complexity of the technical aspect of it.

S15: And it kind of relates to the job that you are doing because if you want to be a successful mechanical engineer you need to have a massive mathematical background, whereas you can be a successful recording engineer and have that title but you may know very little about electrical engineering.

S16: Then in a musical context it's like your ears are your tools. We came here to learn how to hear, really. Our hearing is like our knowledge of circuitry in what we do. Instead of having to be really technically minded, like knowing how electronics and stuff work, we don't need to know that side of things but we need to know what we hear and we need to have an aural ability rather than a mathematical ability. I think it's a different application.

S17: I would say that, in my opinion, all engineers apply physics maths and electronics to some extent.

S16: Maybe you do it in a subconscious way because you don't realise, well, you do because if you break it down you are using technical processes but you're using them in an audible way.

S17: Everything we do is applying maths physics and electronics.

Jez: So you're saying this is almost a subconscious process: you're doing something which is technical and which requires you to solve problems in physics and maths but you're bypassing the conscious calculation part and just hearing something and knowing how to effect a result.

S16: It gets to the point where you know what a compressor does, you know what you're going for, but you don't need to every time you do it think 'right, well, this is going to do that and it's going to do it with this bit of circuitry', you don't, it would be ridiculous to do that with every process.

S18: Music is not, on the front of it, the thing that gets sold is not a technical thing. People don't think 'so this is gone through loads of technical processes' so, in a way, it's packaged and then that makes people want to engineer. So, all the DAWs you have and everything has a neat little user interface, which you can work out easily without understanding the deep technical aspects, whereas maybe in some other areas of engineering it doesn't come with that neat little package on the front of it where you can just twist a few knobs.

S19: I'd be surprised if it didn't. I mean, my knowledge of other engineering things is very, very limited but I'd be surprised if there wasn't some sort of simpler way to, for example, design things.

S15: I think as technology advances it's going to take the definition of engineering from what we do a lot more. If you think about it, in the 50s and 60s when this all started engineers actually built their own desks, whereas now someone who doesn't know anything about music technology can come up with really good quality results by working in the box and I don't think anyone in the world can build a bridge without knowing anything about maths and physics.

Jez: I'm recording these sessions: all that is required for me to do it to get [the recorders] out of the box, plug them in and then hit record. OK, I would never mic up a recording session like this: if I was actually recording a concert or recording a vocal then obviously I take a great deal more care but even doing this 50 years ago would have required a lot: I would have had to I would have probably walked in here with a white coat on.

S20: What I think engineering is, well I think the word comes from the word 'wit' which means, from where I come from, it's about finding out ways of solving problems. Being an engineer involves a different way of thinking than regular people, a different methodology and also it's a knowledge in-depth it's knowing in-depth, which is way beyond what I think we do here. So, for me, this is not engineering: it's technical but it's really related to it.

Jez: That's really interesting because you have summarised very clearly there the view of many people, certainly within engineering, of what engineering is. So, given that definition of an engineer, how many people here think that happens in the studio? How many people think this happens within personnel in the studio, this methodology, this different mind-set, this different way of solving problems?

S21: I think the way that you solve problems probably ends up defining you as an engineer. The best engineers have essentially got the best solutions to any problems that come up, even if it's not a problem in a technical way but, taking the example we had earlier when there's a producer who says

this vocal needs more bite, that's a problem and you need to find an answer to it and the best engineers have got the best answer to that.

S22: That's probably the case with all aspects of engineering isn't it? I think it's quite a good definition: someone that makes things possible.

Jez: Yes, and another one I have heard is that engineers are people who make things happen well. There is a saying that an engineer can do for 10p what anyone can do for a pound and I think you can turn that around and say that an engineer can do well what anyone can do shoddily. Going back to your idea of methodology, there is this approach which means, and I have to be careful here - I'm not telling you that this is the way that it is I'm just reporting to you what other people have said to me, there is this approach to doing things which means that you can be satisfied that you're getting the best results: you're not settling for second or third best you know that what you are doing in that situation is the best that can be achieved. OK, has anybody got anything else that they want to say about the identity of engineers or whether they are engineers?

S23: You were saying about how anyone can pick up a piece of software and press record I think it's more that you are applying your knowledge and if you don't have that prior knowledge, you have got nothing to apply or give to the studio session.

Jez: So, have you got something to give? Is there something within you or something that you will do which will give a different result?

S24: I'm not even sure that on popular chart records you get an engineering credit anymore, on some of them you have: co-producer, the producer, co-writer and programmer.

Jez: OK, I think certainly with the split between pop and rock you have probably hit on something there. You could argue that maybe there are so many microphones involved in pop music and so, traditionally, in terms of the way that we look at these roles, it is not a recording engineer: it's a programmer.

S24: Back in the day it was just a music industry but now it's really subdivided: rock and jazz and whatever.

Jez: Do you think that the term might be on the way out?

S25: I think especially in the industry right now, with the economic state generally, we've gone back into a recession and there's not much money, there's labels left, right and centre losing a hell of a lot of money. They are not going to be willing, I don't think, in the next few years to be paying two people, a producer and an engineer, to do a session. They're going to go 'well, this bloke, he's amazing and he is just one man and he costs less than two of you' so the ability to record and produce, as much as they're doing these 360 deals in labels, I think they are expecting producers and engineers to be one entity now. Obviously, you're always going to need, in situations with big bands, more people but I think it's less what engineering used to be less: a creative hub and a technical facilitator. It's more your main producer/engineer, your name on the record, the guy that

the label goes to because they know they're going to produce a result, and then someone who is just helping them.

Jez: So, there is one person who is the go-to person and then they farm and little bits out?

S25: Yes, and obviously they need a physical hand, they will need an additional person because they can't physically be in the live room and in the control room at the same time, but I don't think personally that the person doing the technical movement of mics and compressors settings etc. is a technical engineer that sorts those things out now. It's one role.

Jez: There are three things that I wanted us to talk about and we've done number one and we've actually jumped onto number three so we might as well carry on with that one, and that is the nature of employment. How easy is it to get work doing what it is that you want to do? What do you think about the possibilities for doing things? Is the way that things are going, with the situation that you have just described and also the way that technology has inexorably gone with the ability to use desktop computers to do things which 20 years ago could only have been done with a very expensive multitrack tape machine: Is that an opportunity for you guys or is that a nightmare? Do you see that there's going to be somewhere for you to go and something for you to do when you leave here and are you clear about where that is what that is going to be like, or do you feel that doors are being closed by these changes?

S26: Do you mean is the opportunity to be employed changing because of new technology?

Jez: Yes, changes in technology and there's less money in the industry because of the ability to distribute things so easily.

S27: I think you've got loads more people that are able to record but at the end of the day it's not all good: you have still got to be good at what you do to make a living. You can think of lots of examples of people who make great music and who don't need a studio. There are examples of bands who have done really well from a single that they have recorded in their room. At the end of the day if you want to have a good recording then you need people who know what they are doing.

S28: I do think that maybe 20 or 30 years ago, or maybe even less probably about 15 years ago, you would have had to go to a big studio, an established studio, and there were a limited amount whereas now anyone can do recording if they want, 'it would be nice if we could record a drum kit, but the budget didn't allow so we just MIDI it in'. It's definitely going to have an impact because all the lower budget things, OK maybe you couldn't have recorded often in a big studio but you might have saved up and done a day there, but they are now able to do much more lower down.

Jez: So because it's cheaper to do this activity there is going to be more of that activity, and so there's going to be more employment.

S29: but at a rubbish quality. Whereas people before would have been paying £600 to a £1000 a day in the studio: if you are a band you'll make sure you know everything when you go in that studio because you can't afford to go in for another day. Whereas a lot of people now I definitely get the

impression it's like 'well, you fix it, you sort it out, you've got all of these tools, I don't need to sing it properly, oh yeah I messed up the drums but you can just take that bit out can't you? It's like 'well, yes but...'. I think all of that base level of knowledge with the simplicity of the user interface, I think musicians especially think they know more than they do and they think it is easier than it is. They think 'that's fine, you chop that bit out there and it sounds great' and, yet, it doesn't sound great.

Jez: You are able to use your ears that you have trained over a long period of time to immediately spot a problem whereas perhaps less well trained years in that particular area are going to say 'well that sounds alright to me' and you're going to be thinking 'no, it doesn't'.

S15: I think you can look at two trends: the first one is the fact that most of the music that you hear in the charts and stuff is the music that makes the most money; most of it, maybe 80 or 70% is produced in a bedroom environment. It doesn't need a full blown studio to produce it and that is the music that makes the most money so, in terms of employment, it's definitely going towards more employment for bedroom producers who do everything.

Jez: Or programmers.

S15: Yes, which is basically the same thing nowadays.

Jez: So, you are saying that there's going to be more opportunity.

S15: Yes, there's going to be more employment for producers in that aspect but studios are closing down because of technology. It's because technology enables more now but also because the flavour of the audience is changing towards music that is programmed rather than recorded, so there is more money in that now, so there are two trends that are leading towards more employment for do it yourself producers rather than engineer-producers.

S30: Whilst it's more employment it's not as financially viable. There's so much more going on now, in terms of music and a massive spectrum that it's transformed into now, than there was so four years ago, but it's not as easy to turn that kind of passion in a hobby into a sustainable income that you can live off. You can be a bedroom producer whereas before, if you were in the music industry you would have to work at a studio: there was no alternative, you could not sit in a room and make tunes. You would have to work at a studio where there was money coming in, people paying a lot of money to have their sessions recorded, but now there is so much more work but it's much harder to turn it into a viable source of income.

S31: People are quite reluctant to pay for it as well because they say 'well, I can come and work with you and we're not in a studio, we're not paying for that and you're just going to do it on your computer. Well, I've got a laptop so why am I going to pay you?' Without having an established name and without having an established background it is difficult to prove to people, obviously you can prove it in the process, but it's difficult to get people through the door and persuade them that you are the difference.

S32: But I think that's almost fair though, because as before you were paying for, OK you weren't paying for the engineer's skill and all his experience, but also you were paying to go into a massive studio. Whereas now if you want to get a number one record you can just do it in a room and that person probably will have the same software as you so, essentially, you are offering them less because you're not offering them this massive expanse of a studio.

S33: Is it slightly related to the luck of the engineer again? Because they might be best friends with this artist who was just the perfect artist and they were obviously going to go to number one and they were obviously going to be a big artist and they have ridden off of their success. They might not be better than anybody else but because they worked with that particular artist they will get more work which means other artists will want to go to them.

S15: I think at the end of the day the music that we should be taking into consideration is the music that makes money. The music that is part of a real economic system not like hobbyists that pay to 'record me and my band because we want to have a record and a producer for an album', but music that is produced by labels and people that actually make money from that music, so they can give money to the producers that work for them.

Jez: Just to play Devil's Advocate against that point: there is, for example, a mass market in cars. Ford Fiestas come off of a production line but that is not to say that there isn't money to be made from making hand built sports cars necessarily but there's much less employment there. I'm saying that to present the other side of the argument, please feel free to shoot me down if that's not the case. Leading on from that point, do most of you see yourself moving towards the mainstream or is there anyone here he would like the idea of the setting themselves up as someone who does some niche stuff. It doesn't have a big market but they are a relatively big player in that market.

S34: I think I quite like the idea of doing exactly what you like and having your own little niche. That's what you're good at and you're earning a living off of that but this is the real world and you can't always do that, you've got to make sacrifices.

S35: The thing is it's difficult to be able to just define yourself as 'I do this', you have to be able to say 'yes, I can do that niche', 'I can do the poppy stuff', 'I can do rock stuff', 'I can do anything as long as you give me money' [laughs].

S36: In the post production sense, if you're going to start at the bottom of the ladder and you're going to be a runner and then doing small scale things like adverts, and then, if you're lucky, you could move on to do sound design for a program, and then film, and then at the end you can say 'I want to do sound design for this film which I really like', but in the meantime you've got to play the game haven't you?

Jez: Is that right, though? I take your point and I imagine that many people would agree that that is the situation that we are in and that is the game that has to be played. Is that right though, is that the right way for people to arrive at their destination?

S36: If you are good enough and you are lucky enough then by all means! I'd love to do the same for a film but no one knows me, I don't have a reputation and you have to build up: there are lots of people that have started off at high levels from this course in previous years but for that you have to know people.

Jez: Is there an alternative way to that?

S37: I think it's becoming more that if you are willing to put yourself out there there are opportunities there. I don't think you necessarily have to go through that traditional route. Actually, in the studio side of things there isn't that route really. I don't really know the figures but I would presume that there isn't much more than 20 or 30 entry positions in England at established studios at the moment.

Jez: I would imagine that you are in the right ballpark, although it's very hard to know.

S37: I think there's definitely a call for people to go and do more niche things, or just getting involved and facilitating at a level which isn't going through the studio runner position: they just say 'right, I will do it' and just get stuck in.

Jez: So a broad range of skills, being able to....

S37: They are looking for that cheap alternative too, so if you can prove that you have the talent. You only need one or two things that pull off and go your way and you go 'yeah, I'll have that' and then you get it someone else goes 'oh, they did that we will get them to do this' and that one may lead to someone tells a friend about a friend and they go 'actually, I have heard about you'.

Jez: Yes. So, that is the way that it works and you are happy to plug into that? OK, so to flip that around then 20 or 30 years down the line you all have successful careers and you are running your own studios how would you want to go about finding people to work for you?

S38: Work in what sense?

Jez: Well, I suppose what I am getting at is how can we tell whether someone is good at this job? The current situation is word of mouth it seems and it's people starting off by making the tea and not putting their foot in it socially in the studios. So, understanding the social order within which things happen inside a studio and then, at some point, getting the opportunity to do something because someone isn't there (or what have you), and that leads to someone saying 'you're good at doing that, right, you can carry on doing that' and then word travels out that way. Would there be, and they may well not be, but is there another way of assessing people's ability?

S39: You could do anything couldn't you? You can get people in for a trial period or something like that. Having come out of a course like this you know that there are people that are good, so you can go in and look around and try and find people who want the job and are good enough.

S40: I think that in so many other Industries it is a lot more like that, where you have to present yourself in terms of your past credentials. So, if you are going to be a banker then you need to have all of these credentials, you need to have had experience, have got top grades and everything whereas a lot more in our industry it is about being a normal person and being a nice person and having people understand that, OK, for the first year that you are here you're only going to be mucking around making tea so you just need to be an alright guy and then from then on in we can try and hone your skills to what we want you to be able to produce for us, so it's a lot more social to that extent as opposed to trying to prove your past credentials.

Jez: And if you can't get past that social level then it's not really going to happen for you anyway regardless, of whether you have the right skills.

S15: I think in terms of the link between education and employment in that context it's the case that in the past people who were like 40 or something that work in studios: producers or engineers or whatever, they didn't study, there wasn't an option to study.

S41: Some of them did.

Jez: Yes, some of them did. SAE was around and Alchemea. But certainly, they might be a bit longer in the tooth now than 40, but certainly there has been a trend recently towards people working in studio who have a degree in that subject.

S15: It started the whole concept of this education what, in the 70s or something, but I guess it became a lot more popular in the last 15 years or so. Just when studios started to decline, so there are more people who have studied it to a professional level but there is a lot less employment in a way, so people who studied it to a professional level in university or whatever, then they don't really need that entry level position of making tea because it's not about making tea is it? It's about engineering, it's about being able to problem solve so the whole concept of that entry-level position making tea and cleaning toilets or whatever when that was the only way that people could learn how to work in the studio, whereas now all of us, most of us, have not worked in the studio making tea and stuff, but we know how to operate the studio I guess at a much higher level than other people.

S42: And that Foundation is still there from years ago, where that was the only way in. You didn't know any of it before you started going in at an entry level position. That structure has still kind of carried across hasn't it, and so now people are coming out of university having done all of this but you have still got to play the game and go through it.

S15: If it was like a normal industry like, I don't know, if you study graphic design then you study graphic design and then you go and work in a graphic design studio and design graphically. But in this industry you study three years and we're all at a very professional level but still we need to go and make tea and I don't think that should be the case.

S43: They are doing you a favour essentially by letting you come in and make the tea, unless you get a lucky break and you manage to do it on your own let's say you are a bedroom producer or somebody who just happens to hook up with an artist who gets a number one.

S44: Some of it is based on the fact that, if you're good enough, then you will get there and that is something that I quite like about this industry and everybody can't just go 'oh yes, I want to work in insurance and get a job with an insurance company, and then I'm going to progress to here, and then I'm going to progress to here, and then I might change company because it isn't big enough, and I'll work at a bigger insurance company and I'll get promoted and promoted until...', whereas here there isn't that progression and it keeps you on your toes, because people that are there at the top doing the big things are good and I think that the only real way of succeeding is being good and sticking around until you get a lucky break. Because it is just perseverance if you are good enough....

S45: But then it comes back to what we were saying earlier about were they actually better than people when they first started out or did they just do one little thing and then someone was 'oh well, you did that alright so you can do this'? There might have been other people who could potentially have done much better but they didn't get their foot in the door or get a lucky break.

S46: I think that's probably relevant in every creative industry.

S15: Even in a creative industry, you know, you need to have other skills in life than just being good at your job.

S47: You could be the best engineer in the world, but if you've got crap social skills then no one will want to work with you.

Jez: OK, well that's covered that nicely and actually we've started to come round now to the second mini topic out of the three, so this is the last one. So, that is how are you going to get what you need in order to do what you want to do? You are all here doing your course at LIPA because you want to be here and get something out of it. What is it that you're getting out of it that is going to help you to achieve the roles and the outcomes that you want to?

S48: We'll probably find that out once we get jobs [laughs].

S49: This gives you a base for plenty of different things that you can do. Probably if we all get jobs in sound we might only use 10% of the stuff we've learnt.

Jez: so from your point of view you are here because this offers you a really good general education in the subject area that you are interested in and then that will allow you to....

S50: Granted, we all specialise in third year So that fine tunes things, but the first and second year not so much.

S51: When I started I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do but in the third year certain things happen and you have an idea of what you want to do in the third year but, at the start of the first year, I didn't.

S50: There are some courses where you just specialise in post-production sound or just do music recording and stuff. There are probably more that are more general based but I'm not sure.

Jez: I think a lot of music technology courses or whatever they are called will spread out, particularly into post production for film and TV.

S52: All of us are here because of what you said before, back in the day what we all want to do is to work in the studio, so we would have gone to work in a studio, but now we can't so we come to LIPA to get the experience that we would have got in a studio, which is cool but there's nothing in life like a real life experience.

Jez: I don't know much about the structure of your course, but have you guys done placements?

S53: You can do it yourself.

S54: Off your own back.

Jez: Has anyone here done a placement? [a few hands go up] How did that match up how did what you were required to do on the placement match with what you had studied? Of course if you were assisting, you were making the tea, then that's a tricky thing to try to align but, even if you were making the tea, and doing general 'runner' stuff, did you see a connection between what the people doing what you would ultimately like to be doing and what you are learning here?

S55: Yes there was a connection but I found with the few places I have been the work flow that they used, the foundation technology and all the things that we've learnt are still there but the way in which it's used is a lot more ... we get a lot of time to do things basically, we get projects and we've got 24-hour studios, we've got loads of studio hours so we can get in there and do it, whereas I found in the industry it's a lot more tight: you need to do this and it needs to be done to this standard, you can go as far as you want above that but you have to hit the standard and if it does it's fine.

Jez: If it doesn't, it's not fine.

S56: It's quite interesting because you were doing a placement at a place called Kitchen Sink and you gave me a ring and said they need this bit of advert music written as soon as you can, so turned it around and send it back 3 1/2 hours later and they were like 'great, we'll run with that'. I was 'hang on a minute, don't you want me to mix it?' and they were 'no, no, it's fine the client said "yeah, cool" here you go' and paid me. It was absolutely crazy but I think 99% of why I got that one was because they were going 'shit, that came back in three hours, yes, cool, yes we'll take that'. They don't have to worry about it: it's in, it's out, it's done the client said 'yeah' because if the client doesn't have

really, really strict taste then they are just willing to go 'yeah, that's alright', and they're paying for it so.....

S15: I would say it's a lot more like that in the media industry than in the music industry because in the music industry it's about the music. It has to be perfect in every aspect of the production, whereas in the media the music is there to serve a purpose.

S55: Yes, the stuff I was talking about was TV-based. It hits a certain level and that's fine it will do.

S56: One thing where I was doing my experience, and it goes against what he was just saying, but this is post and so this is different to a music studio, but they didn't really care about degrees at all. They'd all been on degrees, but they said it hadn't help them get a job.

Jez: Did you find that they're often degrees in completely unrelated subjects, like history or philosophy?

S56: A lot of them had been on courses which weren't as good and they didn't enjoy them, and the MD of the company he wasn't impressed by them, he was just like 'well, you can make the tea'.

S57: As well as getting that base later, it's about coming out at the end of the day with thousands of other people from loads of other courses, similar courses across the country, and you just got that bit of paper that said I put three years' work into it, so now I'm going to put the effort in, whereas if you don't have that why would somebody employ you over somebody who hasn't done that? OK, maybe they don't care that much about it but it shows that you put three years' work into it.

S58: Especially coming out of LIPA as well. The reason that I came here is because it's one of the best places to do what we want to do, I think that's why we're all here because he saw it and we thought 'well, if we can get in there. then brilliant'.

Jez: It's a name isn't it?

S58: I'm not going to rely on it, but it definitely opened doors and there's a lot of people post-LIPA, there are either people in the industry who go 'well, yes, I know someone who went to LIPA', or they are actually owning the company that you are working for.

Jez: And I guess there is a network of LIPA of people out there, building up.

S58: Yes, every year and it's all friends of friends who know each other. We've been here, we've been mates for three years so if someone rings someone else and goes 'ah, you know you've got that contact'. I'm sure everybody is going to help each other out when they can.

Jez: So, you've got a head start on that.

s20: Yes all that is true, but it depends on where in the world you are because, for example, back home where I come from having a degree is sometimes more important than having experience like if you have a degree...

Jez:where is that?

s20: Venezuela. But if there is a place like that there might be other places like that too, it's not always the case but it's sometimes the case.

Jez: So we shouldn't just assume that the situation in the UK or in Europe is the same everywhere.

s20: If you have a degree on anything, outside abroad, you're going to have more weight than another person and also if you have a degree, whatever it is is going to have more weight even if you've been working in their sound-tech forever.

Jez: Is there an inflation of expectations? So, now you still got to make the tea but you have to have a degree to get to that stage?

S59: The studio where I've just done work experience, which is quite a big one and there was 30 or 40 runners, every single one has a degree pretty much and I don't think it really mattered where it was from but it made a difference to how quickly you progressed. So the next step is to work in the machine room and if you had a background in, say, on this course we did quite a lot of technical stuff we would be more likely to get promoted and sooner than someone who did, I don't know much, but animation or something where perhaps there isn't so much emphasis on using technology. In that sense it's easier for us to move up if you have that technical background, if you have the engineering background.

Jez: So, you can maximise the opportunities that you get because you've got skills which shine in those particular situations. Is that what you get from here, do you feel?

S60: I think from that tea making position when you're there, you're waiting for someone not to be here one day, you're waiting for your break and I think the knowledge that we learn from here means that when that break comes, if you are doing that then cool, you'll be able to get it done and you have filled that position and they will go 'right, he can do that', whereas if we hadn't have done this we would be well out of our depth.

S61: Maybe but we've been doing this course for three years, so you wonder whether you'd be better off than that person who doesn't have a degree but if that person has been in the studio for three years.... so that we get promotion to somewhere in six months' time so that's pretty much four years since we started uni and the other person has been in the studio the whole time....

Jez: We need to do one of those case studies I think don't we where we follow 10 people that come to a place like this and 10 people who go straight into the industry and then see how they're getting on after every 5 years.