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Transitions in higher education: the relationship between the thoughts and aspirations of students entering higher education in art and craft areas and the opportunities awaiting them at graduation

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Abstract

Governmental pressure to raise the number of students entering higher education in the UK has seen more aggressive strategies being introduced in order to entice students to continue their education. An argument is raging among art and design academics to whether this expansion is wholly ethical, especially within art and design subjects where the professional opportunities are finite and often complex in their development.

This paper looks at the relationship between the aspirations of students at entering university and after they have subsequently graduated. Studies undertaken by the authors are used to explore issues facing secondary school students when deciding upon undertaking higher education. The thoughts and reflections of graduates about their education and career progression are also investigated and key issues are documented about the intentions of students and career realities.

Key issues include:

- *are universities honest about career opportunities within art and craft areas?*
- *do students enter higher education in art and craft areas with the intention of becoming practitioners?*
- *how much parental influence underpins students' educational choices?*
- *what careers do art and craft graduates undertake?*
- *what are graduates' reflections about their education and development of careers post graduation?*

Keywords: careers, employment, curriculum, influences, opportunities

Introduction

Each year, in universities across the country, tutors examine a plethora of portfolios in order to select their next cohort of art and design undergraduate students. Demand is generally high and thus acceptance is not automatic. The students' who are chosen will begin a long journey into uncertainty. During the degree the perceptions implanted in secondary education will be exploded and new insights into creative practice developed. By graduation, these students will have made decisions about their specialist areas and will have developed a body of work, which will reflect their philosophies, personal direction and future ambitions.

Many of the courses offered in art colleges are seen as generally vocational and this tends to be reflected in recruitment strategies. One assumes that graphic design, multimedia studies and web design have strong visible career paths and hold true to the vocational supposition. But what about fine art and craft courses? How many fine artist graduates will make a living from producing and selling work, and how many craft companies can be sustained in the UK? Can universities justly claim that these subject areas offer stable vocational opportunities for their graduates?

Do students applying for art and craft courses see their future careers as the next generation of Damien Hursts' and Tom Dixons'? Or is their

future vocation lower on their list of objectives? If vocation is not a driving force for these students, what are the goals that they expect to achieve from their education and how will these affect their futures?

This paper uses two projects which have studied students and graduates from Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen to investigate similarities and differences between the aspirations of students at the inception of their degree education and graduates reflecting upon their education and subsequent career development.

The initial aspirations of students choosing art and craft courses are scrutinised through Henderson’s (1999) research, whilst Bouette has studied graduates with the intention of exploring their development from graduation to current career. Topics discussed within the paper include:

- who influences students to undertake higher education in art and design areas?
- what do students expect from their education?
- what careers do they go on to do?

Methods

Bouette used in depth interviews with six graduates from Gray’s School of Art to investigate specific issues regarding the relationship between education and employment. He has interviewed graduates about their career experiences and education to uncover the complex decisions made within the transition from education to employment.

The individuals chosen graduated from university between 1990 and 1996 and represent a cross section in terms of the courses they studied. The findings are first hand accounts of their struggles, frustrations, successes, and subsequent careers.

Henderson used structured ‘focus groups’ and a questionnaire as research methods in the collation of data for his investigation into the expectations of students entering higher education in art and design areas. The study utilises the information furnished by new students to develop a greater understanding of their considerations when choosing and entering higher education.

The questionnaire targeted 159 first year art and design students during 1998; a return rate of 80% was achieved. The data collected has been used to establish trends in students’ perceptions and attitudes when entering higher education.

Key issues

Who influences the educational decisions of students aspiring to enter art and design at higher education level?

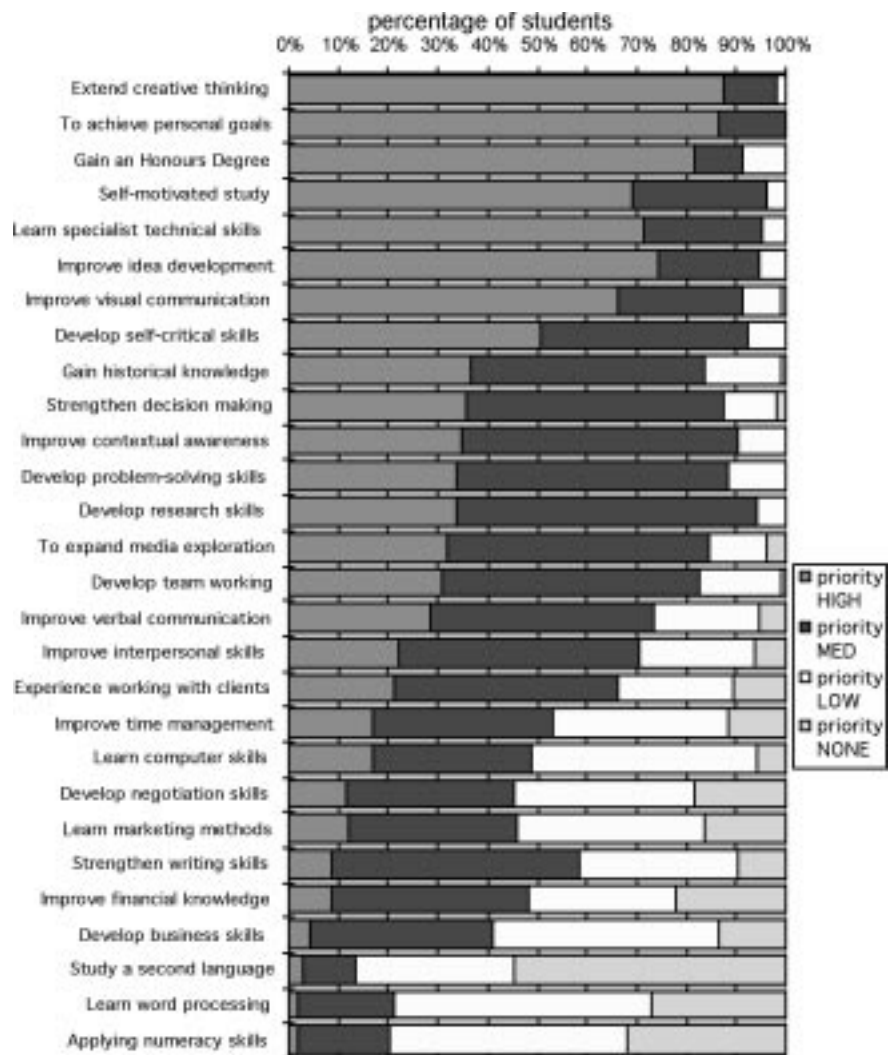


Figure 1: Graph showing what first year degree students expected to achieve through studying art and design.

Henderson's questionnaire findings show that 74% of the students were highly influenced by secondary school teaching staff to continue art and design to degree level. Other major influences were parents (53%) and friends (57%), with 'open days' offering the most influential university marketing tool with 49% of the students seeing them as 'highly influential'.

At the other end of the scale, the university's (Gray's School of Art) web site attracted only 2% of the students' responses even though 67% had access to the Internet at home.

The level of teacher influence is perhaps acute in Scottish education as most students graduate directly from secondary school to higher education. In other areas of the UK the foundation course is seen as a transcending period between the two and thus one would expect to see this area as more prominent.

Do students enter higher education with the intention of becoming practitioners?

When asked to prioritise what they wanted from their art and design education, Henderson noted that creative thinking (87%), achieving personal goals (86%) and gaining an honours degree (82%) were most frequently identified as being of 'high priority'. Business skills (4%), computer skills (18%) and working with clients (21%) attracted lower scores in terms of being of 'high priority'. Indeed, within the responses not seen as being of 'high priority' include many of the 'core skills' identified in the Dearing Report (1997) including the application of numerical skills which only attracted a 2% response (Figure 1). This would seem to suggest that the intentions of these students were predominantly knowledge based, with the commercial aspect being of less importance.

However, when asked specifically about careers, 90% of the cohort expected to gain employment in art and design and 74% expected to gain art and design related employment in Scotland. This raises issues about whether students at this level are naive about the skills required and realistic prospects within these areas, or whether they see the learning of the subject as more important and are simply not interested in the commercial aspects of the courses yet.

When the responses to this question are re-examined in terms of being considered to have 'no pri-

ority' it becomes clear that learning a second language is seen as predominantly of no importance, with 55% of the cohort rating it as of 'no importance' to their studies. However, business skills (14%), working with clients (12%) and learning computer skills (5%) score less, which indicates that most students see the need for these subjects within their education, although not necessarily as a 'high priority'.

Bouette noted within his interviews that art and craft graduates described great differences between their expectations of careers and the realities of developing businesses. One study noted that, 'My degree was in fine art, in sculpture and despite the fact that I absolutely loved it and that was what I wanted to do when I was at art school, I hadn't even considered what I was going to do when I left.' (Bouette, 2001)

This attitude reflects the notion that students enter higher education for the experience as opposed to the development of a career. However, this is an over simplistic assumption. For most, the need to learn about the professional aspects of their subjects grew throughout the course, with the graphic design and multimedia design students being more aware of the commercial aspects of their education than those from other subject areas.

Evidence from these interviews suggests that most thought that employment would be a simple transition. Of course, for many it was not. They described how their career knowledge was based upon studying the elite of the art and craft hierarchy. One graduate suggested that it would have been more useful to have 'been encouraged to look across the board, things more local, perhaps people working in the vicinity, things that weren't so high

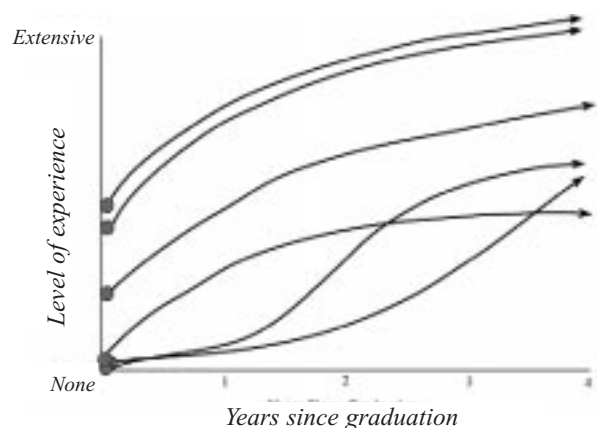


Figure 2: Graph visualising the development of IT skills by the graduates interviewed by Bouette after completing their university education.

flying really.’ (Bouette, 2001) This identifies a gap between elitist views on craft and fine art careers and a need for knowledge about different tiers of employment that exist within these areas.

IT issues

The identification of low perceptions about information technology within art and design areas in Henderson’s study is also evident within Bouette’s findings. Bouette detected that fine art and craft graduates lacked computer skills when graduating from university. However, between graduation and their current employment, all of the graduates described the necessity of developing these skills.

All the graduates interviewed are now experienced in using graphic design tools such as PhotoShop and Illustrator as well as word processing and spreadsheet programmes (Figure 2). The study also discovered that those who had been taught basic computer skills within higher education were able to move more quickly into employment. Those who had initially left university with little or no IT skills found the transition more difficult. They described the importance of word processing in all forms of employment and some used postgraduate study as a way of re-engaging with these skills.

Location issues

Findings from these interviews also highlighted connections between professional prospects and location. At the time of the interviews all of the graduates were living in Scotland, with one working abroad. However, two had previously worked outside of Scotland in order to develop their skills and returning to central Scotland to utilise them. Indeed, all three graduates developing fine art or craft specific careers had chosen central Scotland to set up and develop their practices. This area of Scotland is comparable with London in England as a cultural and industrial centre.

The graphic and multimedia design graduates were still resident in Aberdeen at the time of the interviews, although one commented that Glasgow would be an advantageous move for him as it would offer more opportunities to undertake a wider range of projects. This is predominantly because Aberdeen is dominated by oil-related work and this is reflected within his current employment. This also highlights the direct link between information technology and busi-

ness, which explains the ability for these designers to find employment without moving further afield. It also underlines the importance of indigenous local industries within specific design related employment.

What careers do art and design graduates take?

The individuals interviewed in Bouette’s study had completed courses within fine art, craft or graphic design and multimedia areas at university. Their current employment included oil engineer, design consultant, self-employed lighting consultant, print maker, self-employed trend analysis consultant and senior graphic and multimedia designer.

Under these titles lie more complex patterns of employment. All the graduates working in art and design specific employment were involved in some form of ‘multiple careers’. In some cases this was predominantly to gain experience of freelance work outside of their permanent employment, whilst for others’ secondary forms of employment were necessary in order to sustain their art or design-based practice. In the first case, the secondary career was always in their specialist area, whereas for those who fitted the second scenario the employment was mainly unrelated to their specialist areas and undertaken specifically to ensure a reliable income, to sustain their riskier specialist practice.

All of the interviewed graduates had at some time been involved in some form of self-employment with four currently reliant on this form of employment. All those currently undertaking freelance and self-employment were doing so within their specialist art or design area.

The graphic design and multimedia graduates described clear developmental career progression within their employment comparable to other career routes such as management. The other craft and fine art centred employment was erratic in terms of career development with career progression being measured predominantly on one’s ability to stay in business, as self-employment in these areas is dominated by autonomous practice.

Analysis

The two projects identify key areas where comparisons between student perceptions and graduate reflections can be made. It is clear that stu-

dents entering degree education in art and design subject areas are predominately motivated by personal development and thus rate professional skills low on their initial list of priorities. This is not to say that they are not career motivated, indeed, 90% expected to gain employment within art and design areas. A contradiction, therefore, exists between the skills and knowledge that students perceive that they need to attain their career objectives and the realities of the careers that they are aspiring to.

Art and design graduates describe complex patterns of employment that include involvement in 'multiple careers'. These are careers involving self-employment and specific commercial skills balanced with creative objectives. The discord between the idealism of the students and the realities of art and design employment highlights a naivety that exists within secondary education about art and design careers.

A similar contradiction exists with reference art and design practice and computer skills. The graduates describe how information technology transcends their art and design practices and thus are a contemporary imperative. However, students entering higher education do not rate computer skills highly within their educational objectives. This raises yet more issues about the prior knowledge and expectations of art and design career practice that students have before entering higher education and thus questions the depth of experience gained within secondary education.

The acute relationship between secondary and higher education is predominantly a Scottish specific situation and is influential in students' decisions to undertake higher education. Scottish higher education establishments thus need to ensure that strong links are made between the two, which might include the sharing of specialist knowledge, especially where the skills knowledge and future vocations of these students are concerned.

A lack of specialist background knowledge is evident through the low status given to both business and computer skills by students entering higher education. Students at this stage of their education are more interested in ambitions of immersing themselves in the fundamental elements of creating and making, possibly as a consequence of being at a level where the profession of the subject seems far removed from the educational experience. This is a fair argument, as a thorough understanding of the subject precedes the need to look

at it in a commercial context. Also, the ability to experiment, discover and create objects without the restrictions imposed by professional obligations allows students to push creative boundaries and in the process develop a greater knowledge of their personal context and thus future professional direction. However, the professional environment is evidently an important factor born out by the graduates and therefore the opportunity to gain some insight into real art and design working practices is valuable for identifying the relationships that exist between art, design and commerce.

The aspect of location also fits within this argument. The majority of students perceived that they would find their future employment within Scotland. This is not a surprising finding as many of the students at Gray's School of Art will have come from either local areas or from across Scotland. Indeed, the demographic population of students at The Robert Gordon University shows that 46% of students come from the Grampian region and 35% from the rest of Scotland, thus representing 81% of the cohort (RGU Annual Report, 1998).

Whether this figure reflects a particular yearning to stay in Scotland or whether it indicates a cohort who have little experience outside of Scotland cannot be substantiated, although it is probable that the latter is more likely. The experiences of the graduates show extensive employment outside of Scotland and some outside of Europe. A pattern among the fine art and craft graduates exists which suggests that moving from Scotland has been necessary for the development of specialist skills and to gain experience. However, graduates return to utilise their experience and thus embellish Scotland with fresh skills and new economic ventures.

Art and design graduates do succeed in finding related employment. They also succeed in finding other employment outside of their specialist areas. The assumption that those who study graphic, multimedia and web design find employment relatively easily is upheld in this study, although doubts about sustaining art and craft careers are not necessarily justifiable. What is evident is that individuals do develop and run art and craft practices, however, to achieve their goals requires the development of a 'dual career' strategy where the riskier specialist practice is run alongside more stable forms of employment. This is a more realistic career path for most art and craft graduates and offers an alternative to the

almost unobtainable models often portrayed within universities' courses.

So are universities honest about the career opportunities that exist within art and design areas when interviewing potential degree students? Well this is, of course, impossible to answer. It is fair to suggest that career opportunities exist for artists and designers in the commercial world and thus selling these courses as vocational is justifiable. However, the extent and financial success of careers in these areas links to specific subject areas and it is fair to suggest that IT driven subjects are in greater demand within industry than other areas due to their intrinsic commercial bias. Other specialist areas offer less defined career opportunities, which often demand the autonomous efforts of the individual to develop and sustain themselves within various forms of part-time and self-employment.

Conclusions

It has become evident within this study that students entering higher education within art and design areas are generally motivated by a passion to learn about the subject and to develop their creative abilities. At this stage of their education the notion of 'future career' is often secondary to the learning of the subject, although most want to pursue art and design related careers after they have graduated.

Students' decisions to undertake higher education within art and design subject areas are largely influenced by secondary school teachers and by family. Therefore, in Scotland, there is an argument for higher education establishments to develop strong links with secondary schools and specifically with teaching staff to enable information to be shared for mutual advantage.

Naivety about careers within specialist areas is evident upon graduation where many struggle to develop and sustain their dreams of art and design employment. Some specialist areas offer greater opportunities for career structured employment, notably those that are information technology driven. Other areas require the development of specialist business knowledge and personal approaches to career sustainability. As a result, these careers take time and great personal effort to build.

One can thus conclude that students entering higher education within these areas probably do have aspirations to become the next generation of

Damien Hursts and Tom Dixons, but they are initially inspired by the opportunity to indulge in creativity. Secondary school teachers are influential figures when it comes to individual students' educational choices. At degree entry level, students have little notion of the commercial contexts of specialist areas and it is plausible to suggest that this is because the professional futures of artists and designers is not a curriculum priority within secondary education.

Higher education thus currently holds the responsibility to develop insights into the professional roles of artists and designers and in doing so continually develop research into the careers of graduates and disseminate realistic and achievable models of practice. In an ever changing, volatile market it is naive to think that these models are static and thus research must be continual, embracing new technologies and mapping out new career opportunities.

Art and design graduates do follow specialist pathways, which are often more complex than the models taught within their education. To ensure that future generations of artists and designers develop clear notions of their professional roles as well as rich, creative knowledge, the bridge between secondary education and higher education must be looked at with the same vigour as that between higher education and employment. The development of the holistic education is thus dependent upon greater communication between secondary teacher and lecturer and between lecturer and professional.

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