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Case study

BA(Hons) Sustainable Product Design, Falmouth University

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“We take an embedding approach to delivering sustainability concepts in our course”

Drummond Masterton.

Drummond Masterton is head of the Sustainable Product Design programme at Falmouth University. Here is our interview with Drummond.

1. What were the main drivers for developing the BA Sustainable Product Design programme?

The BA Sustainable Product Design course may appear relatively new (it was inaugurated in its current form three years ago), but it builds on a strong previous heritage. In 1998, Dr Katie Bunnell and her colleagues created a design programme with innovation, community and environment at its heart. As Drummond says, “It was probably ahead of its time”. Three years ago, the programme was rewritten and renamed to “Sustainable Product Design. ERDF funding for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly has been a powerful driver; crosscutting themes include: embedding the sustainable use of management of resources; exploiting the research and development potential of the combined universities in Cornwall partnerships to trigger eco-innovation; and the growing of the environmental goods and services sector. This allows staff to integrate their research into teaching.

2. What approaches and methods are used in the course?

The course makes use of future-facing design methods as employed by organisations such as IDEO. Design probes and visioning tools help students to develop ideas with the potential for

impact on environmental, ethical and moral level. This is balanced with smaller metrics for measuring impact such as LCA. Within the course, such metrics are a check rather than a driver. In addition, the course makes good use of guest lecturers. These are usually well-known exponents of sustainable design, such as Tracey Sutton, a sustainability consultant who has previously worked for Pearl Fisher and now advises companies on circular economy models. The guest lecturers give the broadest picture of sustainability from incremental industrial approaches to radical innovation. There are live projects the staff use their research contacts and as networks of sustainable design experts develop, this keeps the programmes at the cutting edge.

The course makes use of team work from the very beginning; borrowing from graphic design colleagues, learning teams are set up with joint objectives and ethos, and the students work together on large projects theme around grand challenges. They critique each others’ work and quickly become aware of their individual and group responsibilities.

Sustainability is embedded firmly into all aspects of study. Drummond reasons: “We believe in an embedded approach because you tend to get percentage improvements from modular approaches, rather than the radical changes we are looking for.

Students at the higher levels are encouraged to establish their own sustainability ethos and write project agreements to articulate these at an early stage. The agreements are for assessing progress and providing clear project

management.

Students are also encouraged to contribute to the development of the programme. Drummond says, “Fees have changed the culture of education; students are now consumers paying £27,000 – so now, more than ever, we have to respond to their feedback”. There are weekly meetings with student reps that feed into staff meetings. The student meetings are informal, but staff meetings are written up and the staff agree action points. Progress against these action points is reported by staff at weekly meetings.

skills is required to attract a different type of learner.

The first graduating cohort will leave the programme in 2016 and Drummond is looking forward to seeing where they gain employment. “The 3D course had quite good case data; 88% of our students went into management-level jobs. We’re hoping that the live projects and the unique characteristics of our students will help us to maintain such high levels and develop students who will truly make a difference to future industry”.

3. What kind of students do you get on the course?

At the moment, about 80% of the students come from a traditional route, with Design and Technology A-Level being the most common qualification. However, the team are trying to diversify the mix to benefit from a broader multidisciplinary approach to sustainable design.

The students are usually very passionate about the ethics and environmental impact of design. Although numbers of applicants have fallen since the course was re-named, Drummond is positive about this: “3D design had more applicants, but not the right applicants”. The D&T A-level courses are under threat due to the new E-BAC educational system which has dramatically reduced the number of students studying product design. A shift from Vocational to Critical