

# **LIFE AFTER THE PARTY: STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND GRADUATE EXPECTATIONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers students' experience of product design education, and explores their expectations of working in the design industry. It provides a contextualisation of recent initiatives that call for increased emphasis upon the commercial awareness of design within the curriculum. Evidence of the 'disconnect' between students' perceptions of design practice and the increasing demands from the industry are detailed.

*Keywords: Student experience, graduate expectations, real world reality, commercial awareness within the curriculum, industry perspectives*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

There is a growing discourse regarding the increased understanding by business of the role that design can play in enhancing competitiveness and innovation performance (1). Design, if employed effectively can add value not only in terms of intellectual capital, but to the bottom line of organisations (2). This is reinforced by the recognition by UK government of the value that design can add to the economy. The increasing emphasis and value of design within commerce is receiving much attention as a number of recent in depth studies have detailed (3,4,5). Designers are progressing into all areas of business operations if all this hyperbole is to be believed.

Yet, the picture is somewhat confused. While many commentators are talking up the value of design, others state that the industry is not able to support the (over) supply of graduates. There are enough talented, proficient new designers emerging for 90% of design graduate employers to be satisfied (2), but industry continue to call for more commercial awareness within education and demand students who are able to apply their technical skills in a day-to-day commercial environment (6,1). The new millennium has seen blurred career paths for design graduates and the increasing discussion around the demand for designers to possess complementary skills that can be applied beyond traditional design boundaries (3,1).

A key issue highlights the challenge for HEIs to provide a broad framework within which to creatively explore design ideas as part of the learning process, while responding to increasing industry demands for business savvy graduates. Clearly a tension exists - balancing creative freedom with demands for business acumen requires careful and well considered curricula.

## **2 CULTURAL CHANGE WITHIN DESIGN EDUCATION**

There is a growing impetus for change within Art & Design education (1). The UK government wishes to embed broad based transferable skills within (design) education which is informing curriculum development happening right now. Building an awareness of the global challenges that face the UK is recognised by educators as being highly important in continuing to make design education relevant to the world in which graduates will operate. However, this is not just a curriculum design challenge for HE, it represents a shift in philosophy and values beyond the traditional boundaries of design education.

Product Design is no longer solely about the activity of designing products, it is now also concerned with the implementation of design thinking within business as a whole. The changing realities of the design and creative industries require graduates to be far more than technical ‘problem solvers’ but to have the skills and awareness to actively identify problems and think creatively to reveal opportunities. This requires design graduates to be business ‘savvy’ with a clear understanding of the drivers that effect and shape commercial decisions. Traditionally designers may not have been party to discussions around a company’s strategic vision. For the product designer to have a meaningful role within business, how should they engage with these debates? If design is the link activity between creativity and innovation, as suggested by Sir George Cox (3), then the design process must exist with an acute awareness and regard for the context in which it is deployed.

Aligned to the calls for enterprise skills and business acumen being accommodated within design curricula is the recent introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) within UK HEIs. Government guidelines recommend the introduction of progress files as a vehicle by which students engage critically on their progress through higher education (7). Recording their achievements, in a manner by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development in its broadest sense. Similarly to the integration of enterprise within the curriculum PDP aims to introduce and build an awareness of broad transferable skills that graduates can utilise in the employment market place. Educators though face immediate challenges to the implementation of these issues.

Firstly; many enterprise and broad based professional practice activities currently exist informally within the curriculum. How to ‘extract’ these practices, making them visible and tangible to the students may require a great deal of curriculum development. Appropriately experienced staff may be required to deliver professional insight while still ensuring that there are clear alignments with the student’s subject area.

Secondly; the encouragement of students to appreciate value in these broader activities, which many within the Art & Design sector still view as falling outside of their core area of study, even though they will be entering work environments where enterprising skills are highly valuable and commercial considerations integral to their daily activities.

## **3 THE STUDY**

Two questionnaires were constructed and distributed to final year product design students from a number of UK degree level courses. It was intended that the results collected from these questionnaires would deliver intelligence into two key areas:

- Student views on their experiences of design education.
- Student expectations of entering the design industry.

Responses to the questionnaires were encouragingly healthy in number, and have enabled the formulation of results that are expressed in the graphs and comments detailed over the following paragraphs. Care was taken by the authors to ensure student feedback could be completely anonymous.

### 3.1 Student experiences of their design education

These questions focused attention specifically on current student experiences, and canvassed views on the variety of learning and skills ‘training’ they have received throughout their degree course. Highlighted within these questions was the degree to which students felt their programme of study aligned to the practices of the design industry, and if their educational experience has equipped them ready for employment.

Figure 1 illustrates student views on their courses alignment to the professional practices of the design industry (in black) and the level of industry alignment they feel should be considered within their curriculum (in grey). Answers suggest that while their courses already include a significant proportion of industry focus, students feel even more industry intensive experiences would have been beneficial in improving their technical skills and would have overall ‘sharpened them up’ in preparation for industry.

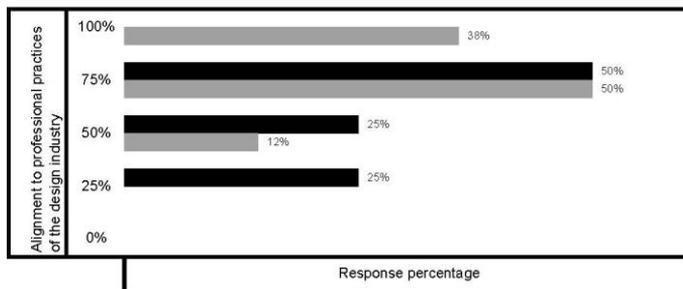


Figure 1. Alignment to professional practices

Figure 2 illustrates the proportional values that the students placed upon a variety of attributes they would typically be developing over the duration of their course. Computer literacy and communication skills were the top scoring ‘most valuable’ skills. Commercial awareness scoring overall the lowest in this set of results

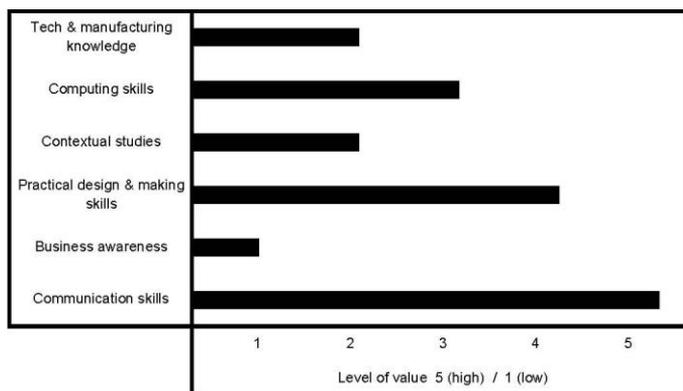


Figure 2. Development of attributes within the curriculum

Figure 3 illustrates that the majority of students completing the questionnaire felt that their course could do more to equipped them with an appropriate level of knowledge and skills to enter confidently into the design industry (in black). Although, the students felt the skills learnt were broadly transferable and held value within the wider design and creative industries sector (in grey).

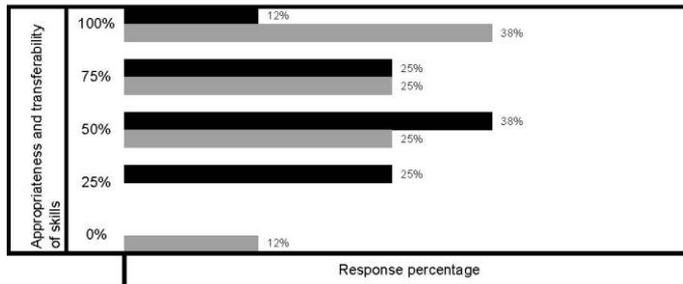


Figure 3. Transferability of skills

Questions regarding the value of commercial awareness, business and enterprise scored surprisingly low in relation to other skills. However, the majority of students in the survey expressed the opinion that 50% of their course activities should be related to business or enterprise issues.

### 3.2 Student expectations of entering the design industry

Approximately 70% of students questioned anticipated that they would be able to secure design industry employment within the first 12 months following graduation. This suggests a high level of optimism and contributes to the results expressing an overall level of belief that their skills are valuable and transferable across the creative industries sector. Less optimistic were the expectations of annual graduate salaries. Results from these questions illustrated in figure 4 suggest that students do not anticipate actually receiving the wage they believe they are worth. Appropriate graduate salary (in black), anticipated salary (in grey).

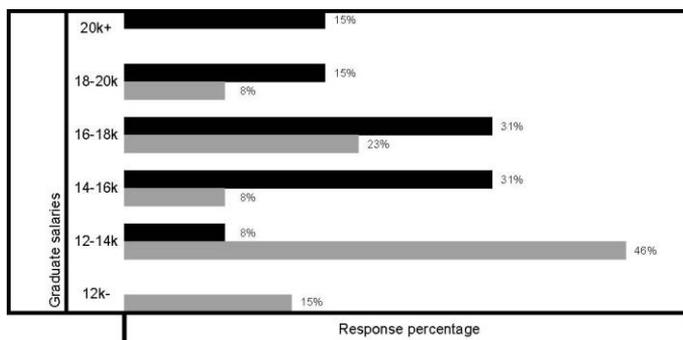


Figure 4. Graduate salaries

Aligning with other results within this survey, creativity, team working skills and computer literacy scored highly as attributes that potential employers would desire from a design graduate. Again commercial awareness scored low amongst the students as a desirable attribute. Figure 5 illustrates the results of questions regarding the desirability

of product design employment options (in black) and the perception of availability for those positions within the market place (in grey).

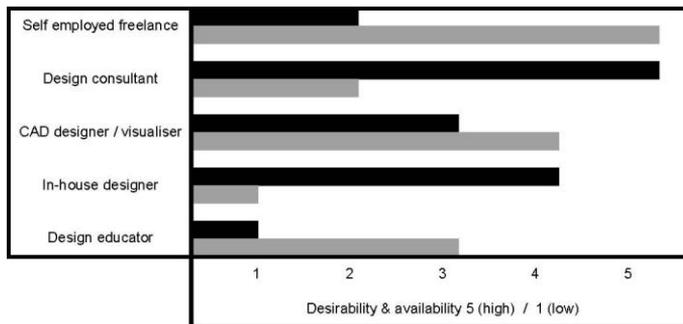


Figure 5. Graduate destinations

The concluding question in this survey asked what students thought would be the greatest differences between their experiences of design education and the working practices of the design industry. From the broad variety of responses a number repeatedly arose, such as; less control over creative freedom and ethical choices, tighter deadlines with no flexibility on the deadlines, a faster pace of working, a greater team focused approach working in interdisciplinary groups and more commercial issues being considered throughout the design process.

#### 4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has presented a summarised set of results from the larger overall survey that was conducted. The authors identify a number of key findings:

- Students perceive there to be a skills gap between the level of competencies they attain while in education, and the level of core design practice skills required by employers within the design industry. Although students experience an exposure to a variety of skills as part of their curriculum they appear to lack real confidence in a proportion of these skills and are uncertain if the skills they possess are of a sufficiently high standard for entry into employment.
- Students are aware of transferable skills and have an understanding of their value in assisting broader design and creative industries related employment. However, the evidencing of these competencies and the opportunities within education to hone targeted skills is felt to be limited.
- There is a ‘disconnect’ between student and industry perspectives regarding the importance of commercial awareness. Results clearly suggest that students do not consider this to be an area of high importance in relation to other skills developed as part of their design education. Neither do they indicate the awareness that commercial or business skills may be highly desired attributes of a design graduate. This is clearly contradictory to what many voices within UK commerce would wish to hear or promote to budding design graduates.
- The opportunities for building relationships between industry and students while in education seem largely driven by project based work. This usually focuses students’ attention on the design process and practical design skills. It is perhaps little wonder then that students view these skills as being the key to employability, and neglect commercial understanding or business sense as important attributes. Simply put, students want to develop design skills to impress their client. This may

be appropriate for the company that set the brief, but industry as a collective voice increasingly calls for commercial awareness to have a greater presence within the academic design curricula.

McCormick (2005) takes a stark position upon the commercial realities of design. ‘Design is a business. You need to understand what business is and how it works, essentially, if you are employed, you need to be worth more than you cost’. Broadening the commercial awareness and skills of tomorrow’s design entrepreneurs will continue to be a key challenge for design education, but this requires a high-level of engagement from industry. If the commercial awareness of graduates is key to the health of the design industry, an effective dialogue between industry, academia and policy makers must be created to ensure an appropriate framework for embedding these issues in the curriculum is established. The mechanism for achieving this will continue to be open to debate.

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