

*Baseline* has always been committed to international academic education within the Graphic Arts. From issue 52 onwards, four pages are now dedicated for a series of inspirational articles, essays, course projects, academic research, etc., from schools and universities around the globe.

Prof. Ian McLaren, distinguished academic and designer, has joined our team as an advisor and editor, to establish this new section on aspects of international design education.

Top: University for the Creative Arts at Epsom (UCA) entrance.

Bottom: Tori Brunt (1st year) Independent Practice work.



## Why do so many students elect to study graphic design?

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According to the latest stats from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 182,085 students were studying creative arts and design in 2011/12 ([www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/239](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/239)). Although graphic design students make up some of this number, it still leads to the question – why do so many students want to be educated in this subject – there can not possibly be an equal number of creative jobs to fill each year. Right?

### But first, what is graphic design?

Essentially it is an interdisciplinary, problem-solving activity for visual communication by combining images, words, and ideas to convey information to an audience. By its nature it is a subject that is in a state of constant change because of the fluidity found in commerce, culture and technology. It demands knowledge of skills such as layout, typography, image making and presentation all in addition to the ubiquitous computer based design approach. It is intrinsic in design to exercise attention to detail and develop an ability to really look at the world in a creative way. It requires a practitioner's continued willingness to learn, and not just to keep up with the many developments in technology. *'It's about new ideas, new ways of working and using new media to make new messages for new audiences'* ([www.gdnm.org/course/graphic-design](http://www.gdnm.org/course/graphic-design)). Each of the many courses that teach graphic design

have their own interpretation and focus within the discipline.

The University for the Creative Arts (UCA) was granted university title in 2008 following the merger of the Surrey Institute of Art and Design (SIAD) with Kent Institute of Art and Design (KIAD) in 2005, Institutions which had amalgamated the original art schools started in the 1800s in each county. UCA currently works across five campuses based in Canterbury, Epsom, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester.

Graphic Design at Epsom is a broad-based degree course taught within a specialist arts institution. Student year groups are encouraged to progressively identify and develop their distinctive 'voice' within the subject through their independent practice at the same time as they study the course curriculum. There is a strong focus on idea generation, and developing an individual's creativity through experimentation with tools, methodologies, stratagems and tactics while looking at the amalgam of relationships in form, content, context and meaning. UCA fosters the ability to critically analyse work with an appreciation of the ethics and politics associated within design solutions as well as how the logistics of application, engagement and exposition may change ideas. The course has a friendly feel and a supportive philosophy towards the student cohort, but it also demands the individual takes responsibility for their actions and work.

### The Creative process

*'Graphic design is about how we think, and what it [sic] communicates to different types of people...which is exciting.'* (BH)

There is a strong benefit to encouraging the students to engage with both the old analogue or tactile processes of screen-printing and letterpress, and new technologies associated with the digital such as laser cutting. Many students are excited and motivated by the different approaches and possibilities stemming from physically creating work when they 'discover' them for the first time. The time it takes to employ some of the processes also offers time to reflect on the work while they are doing it, which can help an individual develop in new ways they had not previously considered. Active failure of trying something which doesn't work is encouraged and celebrated, and will often lead to serendipitous outcomes. Students are encouraged to translate analogue and digital approaches backwards and forwards between the two and thus develop unusual and creative outcomes. Being creative through



taking risks is quite a scary process for most individuals, but it is one of the requirements of studying at degree level and offers the most reward. Unlike science where a principle like 1+1=2, always. In the creative arts we encourage the idea of discovery i.e. 1+1=?.

Many students say they want to study graphic design because it is such a broad subject.

*'It offers freedom, integrating both traditional and modern ways of working, students like me who have an interest in things such as photography, illustration, printmaking, and*

*typography can explore these further through Graphic Design...it gives you the chance to be imaginative with your thinking, where absolutely mad ideas are encouraged, with the idea that having an open mind and suspending judgment is great in progressing your ways of thinking and exploration.'* (GW)

Another student said: *'Graphic design is a way of showing a creative process through a detailed amount of thought and planning which allows you to experiment with different mediums, forms and the visual communication that we see from*

*everyday to day life. Personally, Graphic Design is a great subject to study due to the emerging of new technology and development throughout [sic] visual language that is shown in today's society and that's what makes it different to any other course.'* (JP)

There's a sense of excitement in their views about what they're studying. Students use their independent practice to explore their interests in a pure sense – without a specific outcome in mind. Course assessment helps them to develop their studies into the

areas they have a personal interest. Often they will start from a brief or task that they especially enjoyed or made a significant discovery in, and through their experimentation find new ways of creativity. They are very interested in the personal projects published by industry practitioners, and how it can challenge an individual into different ways of thinking and answering a client's brief. The course uses blogs for students to gain practice in researching, analysing, critically discussing and sharing their work and especially their independent practice work.

**What about a vocational career?**

Employability is an especially high consideration with this being the first year students have to pay up to £9k in tuition fees. Educational establishments like Epsom Graphic Design do a lot to help their students prepare how to approach their postgraduate future.

Most students feel graphic design affords them more of an opportunity to get a job to pay back the large loans through joining advertising or design agencies, or working as freelance

designers building up a list of their own clients.

*'I knew I wanted something that would be ambiguous, challenging, creative and that was going to be viewed by the large masses. I thought graphic design would be an art specialty that had some realistic professional end to it.'* (EAS)

While studying, students start to identify and pursue those areas that hold their interest, some focus on the digital arena of web design and moving image, while others find editorial design applied to books and brochures more satisfying.

*'As I was never exactly sure if I wanted to be an editor or an illustrator – graphics could allow me to do both... a professional has a lot more room and options in the industry than other practices.'* (EAS)

Most students studying the creative arts believe the subject is not 'academic' but instead vocational. *'(Students) won't have to worry about the contextual side as much such as writing 20,000 word essays 24/7 and can progress with something they want to do within the future.'* (JP)

They believe the three years of study on the degree, ideally

with another year pre-degree on a Foundation Course, can help them get work experience and prepare them better to...

*'use it in real life practice compared to a standard academic course in which may teach you the basics but never teaches you how to apply these skills in real life settings; like Graphic Design does.'* (JP)



Top left and bottom left: Students curating the 2012 Type Directors Club (TDC) Exhibition, for the Typographic Circle at JWT Advertising Agency.

Top right: Private view of the 2012 Type Directors Club (TDC) Exhibition, for the Typographic Circle.

Bottom right: Students had five hours to curate the exhibition then stayed on to network with the invited audience from the creative industry.



Top left top: Visiting Lecturer – Martin O'Neal's 'Collage workshop' discussing balance and layout.

left middle: Visiting Lecturers Martin O'Neal (left) and Vaughan Oliver (right).

left bottom: Student Research as part of a workshop with Vaughan Oliver to create section dividers for Elephant magazine.

right: Visiting Lecturer – Vaughan Oliver's '13th month' workshop.

Middle Ester Amigo Sanchez (2nd year) sign painting in the graphic design area.

Bottom left: Bookbinding workshop at UCA Espom.

right: Cenzina Sarcone (2nd year) screen printing with Marmite on rice paper and tested on a fellow student.



**The lecturer's role**

This is a multi-faceted role for sure because so much is expected of the lecturer from students, industry, government and the institution. A lecturer is a facilitator of educational opportunities but they also help students develop transferable/life skills. Students come to college with an expectation that their tutors will be able to teach, motivate and inspire them. As part of this process, Epsom identifies creative strategies and methodologies they can learn, develop and apply. Students are encouraged to take increasing levels

of responsibility for their future, to help them become independent learners before graduating so that they're able to join the workforce with confidence.

Students are encouraged think seriously about their future by researching companies and getting to know the industry, to identify areas they should be looking to join. They are encouraged to attend external industry talks and conferences run by organisations such as the Typographic Circle, D&AD, and St Brides, which not only give great information but also provide networking possibilities which may lead to internships and placements.

Visiting lecturers and speakers offer students great 'home ground' opportunities to speak with knowledgeable and experienced people and to see work from a variety of areas of the business. The creative industry is extremely supportive of education with many professionals offering their time for the Studio Visits programme, sharing a direct insight into different working practices and the philosophies of the companies. Conferences provide another range of speakers from the industry who inspire and motivate students who're looking for 'tips about working in the industry, and also about how to work whilst doing

an internship or work experience'. Live briefs develop interaction and negotiation skills through real world work and monetary prizes and work placements. Competition briefs give a national comparison against other students' work and a huge boost in self-esteem if won. PaperCo's Brief Encounters competition enabled students to question the brief and then present back to the Client outside of the university campus as part of the process. There was a marked and positive change in attitude towards the future by the end of this process.

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## In Conclusion

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Many undergraduates arrive at University because they believe it will give them greater opportunity to pursue a creative career and perhaps a greater return on their investment. They think graphic design is the better option because they see it as a more vocational track that is less academic than other courses. It is a broad subject that offers many different directions for their studies, and one that also provides 'experiential learning' where they can

combine work experience and direct engagement with industry in their studies. Increased tuition fees are having an impact as students have to make more careful considerations as to which is the right course for them, but graphic design remains a popular choice and it is both exciting and fun.

It seems to be a well-kept secret that the creative industry brings in circa 2.2 per cent of GDP or £33.5 billion annually according to figures published by the Design Council ([www.ncluedesign.org/facts](http://www.ncluedesign.org/facts)). In these austere economic times, the search for a job may take

a little longer but if the graduate is persistent they will find work in one of the many opportunities that exist in the industry as the significant number of graduates from Epsom who are working within their first year as graduates can testify.

(UCA Course website) [www.ucreative.ac.uk/ba-graphic-design](http://www.ucreative.ac.uk/ba-graphic-design)  
(Course blog) [www.gdnm.org/course/graphic-design](http://www.gdnm.org/course/graphic-design)

Thanks to students: Bec Halsey, Grace Walsh, James Pentand and Ester Amigo Sánchez.



Top: Teams of two present to the client and receive feedback on how they presented as well as on the work produced.



Bottom left: Laura Heckford (3rd year) screen print.

Bottom right: Grace Walsh (2nd year) illustrations screen printed onto a book cover.

