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.

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). 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). 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...
Many students may 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 supporting judgment is great in progressing your ways of thinking and exploration. [JK] 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 you use from everyday to day life. Personally, Graphic Design is a great subject to study due to the emerging of new technology and developments throughout [sic] visual language that is shown in today’s society and that’s what makes it different to any other course.’ [UP]

There is 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, analyzing, critically discussing and sharing their work and especially their independent practice work.

What about a vocational career?

Employability is an especially high priority for many with this being the first year students have to pay up to £3k 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 by paying back the large loans through graphic advertising or design agencies, or working as freelance designers building up a list of their own clients.

‘I’ve heard 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 these 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.

Many students are not exactly sure if they want to do a particular career or profession but instead vocational. [JP] ‘I think it’s a good course because it’s very practical and gives you a chance to be imaginative in your chosen field without a specific outcome in mind. I think it’s great that you can go into design thinking of what you want to do within the future.’ [UP]

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 for their future career. ‘I love it in real life practice compared to a standard academic course in which may teach you how to apply these skills in real life settings, such as Graphic Design does.’ [UP]
In Conclusion

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.ncludedesign.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
(Course blog) www.gdnm.org/course/graphic-design
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