

MA DESIGN PRACTICE & MANAGEMENT: A REAL INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIC COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

In an economy where the Creative Industries are recognised as an important contributor, Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) acknowledged the importance of preparing design graduates with the appropriate entrepreneurial skills necessary to enable them to capitalise on their creative skills, contributing therefore to the continued success and competitiveness of the Creative Industries. A Postgraduate Masters programme was developed and introduced with the objective to create graduates who could better understand how to exploit their creativity, manage innovation, recognise and assess the credibility of their ideas and know how to implement them. This programme works closely with a number of highly regarded Creative agencies representing a wide variety of creative disciplines, giving students an unparalleled opportunity to engage with these companies in an academically accredited manner. This presents the students with a unique learning opportunity and further adds an important element of experience of working in the Creative Industries both at a strategic high level and at an operational day-to-day level. The Creative agencies and their employees benefit from this experience in that they refresh their professional and academic base through this contact and involvement. All parties gain informally from the experiences in that, the close working relations, maintain a high level of relevance from the shared knowledge and have a direct impact on the students' employability. The students ultimately benefit from an experiential opportunity supported by the academic process, which hugely enhances their professional capabilities and personal CV's while achieving a Masters level degree.

Keywords: Creative industries, companies, students, opportunities and experience

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper firstly examines the need to address the shortfall of business skills acquired by design graduates in order to capitalise on their creative skills. Secondly, it considers the rationale behind, and the success of, a unique Postgraduate Design Management programme introduced by Glasgow Caledonian University. This programme was designed to further develop graduates in the Creative Industries sector by encouraging them to advance their ideas into commercially viable propositions. A unique element to this programme is the close liaison of Academia and Industry, with academic input delivered from within the university and complementary work related learning taking place in relevant commercial creative companies. The programme is a 1 year Masters programme with a maximum cohort size of 20 postgraduate students from a range of Creative Industry academic backgrounds.

2 CREATIVITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Creativity is considered to be a significant driver of social and economic change. The UK is also considered to be one of the worlds most creative and innovative nations. The Department for Culture Media and Sport reported in (2005) "that the creative industries employ two million people in the UK and account for a twelfth of the economy, more than in any other country. Furthermore, exports by the Creative Industries totalled £13 Billion in 2004, indicating widespread recognition of UK creative talent". In addition, The National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (2003) reported, "that in the last 100 years 54% of patents filed worldwide originated in the UK". However, whilst the UK may be good at inventing, they are not so good at exploiting these inventions, and in recent years it has become evident that there is a definite need to marry creativity and entrepreneurship in order to successfully exploit ideas in the emerging knowledge economy. Furthermore, design industry research

carried out by the Design Council (2005) reported “93% of designers think that business skills are either essential or useful in the design curriculum whilst only 54% of design colleges agreed. From these statistics, it would appear that design students are not being trained appropriately to enable them to successfully secure jobs in the professional sector or indeed to set up their own professional practice. In addition, only 39% of new appointments are made direct from College or University”.

3 THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Sir George Cox stated in the Cox Review (2005) “the need to give every student likely to work in, or with business, a wider understanding of business practice and recommended that Universities go further and introduce Masters programmes that bring together different elements of creativity, technology and business”. As a result, an education and skills working group was formed as part of the UK Creative Economy Programme to consider the contribution that education and skills can make to the Creative Economy agenda. The group highlighted that the creative sector is one of the most highly educated with around 43% having degrees or higher-level qualifications, significantly more in some sectors, compared with 16% of the workforce as a whole. Department for Culture Media and Sport reported in (2005) “the group recognised that graduates from creative disciplines are more entrepreneurial than their peers with over one third of all self employed first degree graduates coming from these disciplines, the highest figure across all subject categories”. Whilst this statistic may seem encouraging it only serves as a measure of entrepreneurial ambition and not necessarily entrepreneurial success as it fails to incorporate any measure of sustainability. Raffo 2000:356) Furthermore, research suggests that graduates in the creative sectors leave education largely unprepared for the business world which tends to result in poor management, uneven growth and ultimate business failure”.

As creative companies are characteristically small and self-employment has been identified as a principal employment option within the sector, Harvey reports, “It is clear that Higher Education have a responsibility to prepare and develop student’s abilities to thrive in this environment”. However, the destinations and reflections survey, a study of the careers of art and design students, suggested that graduates did not feel that University had prepared them adequately for careers in the Creative Industries. It also claimed that although graduates valued business and professional studies elements of their programmes, they felt these elements were lacking from many undergraduate programmes. (1999).

One argument from academia opposing entrepreneurship education is that by encouraging students to consider the commercial implications of their work hinders their opportunity to exercise total creative freedom. Contrary to this, it is believed that failure to educate students of real industry issues and commercial realities makes the transition from education to workplace very difficult, often resulting in graduates having an unrealistic view of what they can achieve and what will be expected of them.

The National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (2006) reported “have acknowledged the skills gap of creative graduates and have initiated a number of programmes to address this shortfall. These programmes recognise the potential of equipping creative graduates with business skills with their primary aim focusing on developing creative entrepreneurs. The most successful of these programmes, the Creative Pioneer programme, provides business training, early stage funding, mentoring and the necessary expertise to enable graduates to turn their ideas into successful business ventures. However, whilst this approach is both commendable and successful, only a handful of the most innovate graduates benefit each year”.

Research undertaken by The National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (2005) reported “to support the development of their Creative Pioneer Programme indicated that what works for business students generally doesn’t work for the Creative Industries who are often ‘turned off’ by traditional enterprise programmes”. This highlights another important area of concern for creative graduates, which is the language barrier. The language and words used by the creative sector, by business, by educators and by government are incompatible and inconsistently applied. This failure to speak and understand a common language makes it difficult for creative entrepreneurs to secure investment and sell their services effectively. Design Council (2005) reports “Clive Goodwin, Creative Manager of Samsung Design Europe encapsulates this well, ‘Today you have to be a salesman as much as a creative, talking marketing and design using the same business justifications. If you do not communicate business language you do not communicate at all’.

While the academic team were considering the background researched as outlined earlier in this paragraph they also maintained close working links across the range of the Creative Industries. Throughout the course of regular discussions there was an increasing rate of comment and anecdotal

feedback from the industry sector. This feedback regularly expressed a similar view that was - *why is it that we can find great creative graduates but they have very little knowledge or interest of the business of design and how to practically manage a creative agency?* - Through further discussions on this topic the academic team developed in close cooperation with industry partners in the creative industries, a new concept that would be a fusion of design management, strategy and implementation and the real-time practice in the sector. The outcome is a Masters level programme entitled MA Design Practice and Management.

4 MA DESIGN PRACTICE AND MANAGEMENT

A Postgraduate Masters programme in Design Practice and Management (MA DP&M) was developed and introduced in 2009, to provide creative students with the skills, knowledge, and support to develop their ideas into commercially viable propositions. (Raffo 2000:356-265) Research informed that creative entrepreneurs learn best by ‘doing’ and reflecting on ‘doing’. Therefore, the primary focus of the programme became that of providing sufficient opportunities for contextualised learning by ‘doing’ followed by active reflection. The objective of the programme would be to, inspire entrepreneurial understanding, encourage entrepreneurial behaviour and to transfer entrepreneurial knowledge.

It was also recognised, that as well as creative and business skills, creative entrepreneurs also require soft skills such as communication, team working, presentation and project management. These skills are encouraged and nurtured throughout the programme. The students also benefit greatly from working with authentic mentors that have sympathy for, and an understanding of, the socio-economic and cultural context within which creative entrepreneurs operate.

4.1 Programme overview

The MA programme is designed to give students the theoretical and academic knowledge from within the university and the practical, real-time experience based in industry. The two main modules that relate to the industrial practice element are managed under a learning contract methodology. This gives the student the opportunity to define and negotiate their particular contract in alignment with the practicalities of the industrial partner and the academic requirements of the module. Thus offering maximum flexibility for the student, industrial partner and academic team, this structure is illustrated in Figure. 1.

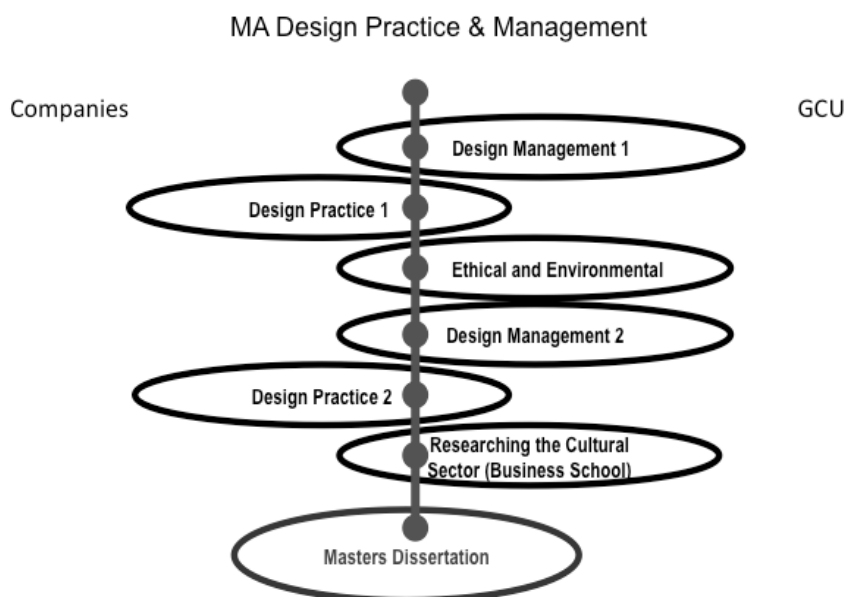


Figure 1. An illustration of the overall structure of the MA Design Practice and Management

The vertical line represents the student path and the modules are represented by the ellipses. The ellipses are biased towards either the university or the partner companies and the overlap is intentional in that the academic team liaises closely with the industrial partners, and the industrial partners regularly provide input on the academic side, therefore a high degree of cross over visits.

Additionally the students are required to attend a research methods module within the Business School of the university, this experience adds a widened approach to research whilst encouraging them to mix with fellow students and staff from a cultural studies background. Another aspect, which is of increasing importance to Creative students, is the area of Ethical considerations and environmental sustainability. Each student undertakes an individual project, which through its length, complexity and rigour acts as the vehicle for extending, in the student, a range of personal, interpersonal, and communication skills. In addition, it serves to develop and extend a range of high-level thinking, analysing and synthesizing skills, this encourages the student to demonstrate initiative and creativity in a major piece of creative work. In essence, the project is the process of contextualised learning by 'doing' and is overseen by a mentor who shares their creative passion and understands the commercial context of their venture. Students are also required to write a dissertation as part of the programme, this substantial piece of independent work is based on an area of interest to the student and includes an honest reflection of their work. The dissertation achieves the final learning objective of reflecting on 'doing'. The individual project and dissertation, supervised by their mentor, support the 'behaviour' development of the student.

Throughout the duration of the programme, a number of external specialists give advice and run workshops/seminars for the students on topics such as funding opportunities, intellectual property, company start-ups, freelancing, managing and working in a creative company. The specialists provide the necessary insight, knowledge and support to encourage the 'understanding' of the student.

5 DISCUSSION

At its outset the programme was designed to answer some obvious lacking skills in creative graduates, help develop creative companies and increase links with academic staff and industrial partners. The intention was that students would be blending and fusing theoretical considerations of the creative industries with experience of practice, thus enhancing their employability. The creative companies while intent on assisting with postgraduate programmes also get an opportunity for staff development and a long interview process for potential future employment candidates. The academic partners benefit from access and involvement in live projects in real-time, these two factors playing an important part in informing future teaching at a wide scale throughout the institution.

In order to verify the perceived benefits to the students an independent research project was established with a view to specifically consider the potential enhanced employability characteristics of the students and programme. GCU has an on-going high level research group working on the "employability" agenda, as such they have developed a set of guidelines that should be implemented when considering employability, these are: 1. Provide students with learning opportunities to integrate theory and practice. 2. Achieve learning outcomes that state what the students will be able to do in the work place. 3. Encourage and support student interest in a wide variety of careers. 4. Require students to take on active rather than a passive role in the learning process. 5. Accommodate cultural diversity. This research group undertook a number of meetings and focus groups with the MA DP&M students and interviewed them, at various points throughout the programme in relation to the five guidelines previously stated.

A sample of the student feedback from the focus groups was as follows:

- "I never really did teamwork on my undergraduate course, so it's great to see how people from different backgrounds can work together and create a functional product".
- "I came to this course because I wanted to know more about the business side".
- "It's good you apply what you have learnt when you are learning it as oppose to having to refer back to things later".
- "The cross disciplinary aspect of the course has been particularly good, you learn to work with people from different backgrounds".
- "You see the theory applied in a different way, it shows you how it can work in real-life".
- "It's really good to see how a creative office is structured".
- "It's great to see the whole process from client brief to the research and the final presentation. You see the whole process. That's really useful, something you would never get on an undergraduate course".

From the student comments it can be seen that they are learning in a different way, taking more risks, have an increased understanding of the complexity in creative businesses, have a perceived increase in self-confidence and most importantly enjoying the whole experience.

Regular and close contact with Industrial partners is key to the success of this programme and they have commented as follows:

- “The students have noticeably become more business savvy in their time and placement”.
- “They have made a real contribution to live projects”.
- “Blended well with the teams employed”.
- “Having the students on the premises has allowed us to engage in much deeper research than we would have previously”.

The research outlined in this paper suggests that entrepreneurial education is key to the continuing success of the Creative Industries, which are a significant contributor to the economy. How this education is delivered and at what level is still up for debate; however GCU have clearly demonstrated the advantages of delivering focused entrepreneurial education at postgraduate level. Key to the success of the programme has been the balanced and flexible approach incorporating a ‘doing’ followed by reflection on ‘doing’ process and involving external specialists, an appropriate mentor as well as academic teaching modules. This model, although challenging from an academic assessment point of view is greatly rewarding from a student development perspective. Graduates of the programme have been enthusiastic about the experience gained and feel it has given them the confidence to set up on their own. Graduates have valued the role of the mentor and the external specialists in developing their understanding and behavioural attributes. By contextualising the teaching modules through their individual projects, students are able to better formulate and realise their ideas into real commercial propositions, which they could present to investors.

It is worth noting that the student cohort is from a wide range of Creative Industry backgrounds including: Architecture, Graphic Design, Product Design, Audio Technology, Jewellery Design, Media Studies and Marketing. None of these backgrounds are particularly advantaged or disadvantaged on this programme. The programme academic background and experience opportunity is clearly equally applicable to them all and is of use to their professional and personal development in their future careers and contribution to Companies and ultimately the economy. It should be stated at this time that the comments above are based on work-in-progress in other words, the student and industry partner comments were received while the first year was in progress, this first year of the programme will conclude in September 2010.

6 FURTHERWORK

The initial success of the programme and the enthusiasm by which both students and industrial partners are responding to the philosophy of the programme is encouraging to the academic staff. This process of regular contact with a community of practice is enabling and demanding a dynamic approach to the programme teaching and management. There are however, a number of issues that have to be considered, these are being actively progressed and appropriate creative solutions are being investigated. The future issues include the following:

- The current programme has a small cohort and is intended to grow to approximately 20 students, if demand is significantly higher than this, this will require a radical increase in industrial partners and a significant consideration of teaching and resources.
- The programme is keen to incorporate as wide a range of creative interest as possible, the current interest from students is all broadly in the commercial visually areas such as Graphic Design Product Design and Architecture etc. Should demand widen our scope e.g. Music and Drama, then the programme must develop an assessment criteria, resources and partners that would be relevant and appropriate.

The outcome would be graduates who not only have appropriate academic knowledge but also an industry informed toolkit of skills to take with them into practice. It is envisioned that this programme would also be of interest to creative agencies seeking to put a formal training programme together for their graduate trainees.

All the industrial partners have expressed strong support for the programme to date, based on their initial experiences and the experiences expressed by the students and on going work by the academic team, the programme will be developed in light of informed opinion as outlined above.

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