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Questioning assumptions on widening participation in art, design and media

All of us would agree that Higher Education should be accessible to everyone who might benefit from it, whatever their background or circumstance. We assume that there is a classlessness about art and design but, judging by this report, is it an assumption that we need to question?

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// I recently spotted my dentist looking through the art section of our local library. Apparently her daughter was being a little lazy with her GCSE coursework and needed help with some of the background research, in order to get a good enough grade to progress to A-level. It's a simple yet telling story - but what should we make of it? Do we call it good parental support or an example of unfair advantage? What if we were to interview my dentist's daughter in two years time? We would almost certainly accept her - she's white, she's female, she's middle class and she will be under 21. She makes a perfect fit with the data sets for participation in art, design and media so clearly laid out in the recent CHEAD/ACE Report on Widening Participation in Art and Design.

Many of us in the ADM sector will be uncomfortable with this report because it does not square with our assumption that creative subjects are, by nature, egalitarian and meritocratic. We assume that there is a classlessness about art and design but, judging by this report, it is an assumption that we need to question.

Yes of course all of us would agree that Higher Education should be accessible to everyone who might benefit from it, whatever their background or circumstance. We regard art, design and media to be a shining example of meritocracy at work. You can't fake creativity with a nice voice and the ability to swat up the night before the exam - art and design demands outcomes that stand alone from their makers - the designed object is disassociated from its maker and therefore disassociated from the maker's background. Our judgements are far too objective to be influenced by a student's background - aren't they?

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And of course, our biggest assumption is that art, design and media lecturers are about as liberal a bunch of people that you are likely to meet - in fact we are so liberal that we see gender and social class and disability and age and race as matters that don't get in our way - that don't colour our judgement. To us, these are not issues for art schools - in art, design and media, we don't really see WP as a problem - and that, in a nutshell, probably is our problem.

So the CHEAD/ACE research is timely and comes as a bit of a wake-up call. The Report provides us with evidence that our assumptions on fairness of access really do need questioning. Despite our liberal outlooks and our anecdotes and innate sense of fair play, it seems that we have had very little hard evidence to base these assumptions on.

The CHEAD/ACE Report provides us with some sobering analysis and points out the many gaps in data and evaluation that still exist. I am not going to repeat the details here, it's all available in the report but there is no doubt that there is work to be done.



One of the most interesting findings of the CHEAD Report is the lack of alignment between staff perceptions of WP issues and the perceptions of the students themselves. This is especially noticeable in the mismatch between student and staff opinions of the importance of literacy support.

It is clear that, in the minds of many academic staff, WP is rather like Health & Safety and DDA compliance, something that can be adequately addressed at institutional level through institutional policies and procedures and, to be frank, offloaded onto specialist designated staff in Student Services and Library and Learning Support. Those of us lucky to still have FE in our portfolios also tend to think that WP is a largely FE matter.

There is a worrying gap opening up between specialist academic staff and specialist student support staff. We are in danger of institutionalising WP to a point that allows teachers to shave it from their agendas because they think it's being dealt with by someone else.

It is interesting to note that, in my institution at least, many student support staff come from non-art backgrounds, they are in a sense outsiders and have the sensitivities that come with being an outsider. While on the other hand, most academic staff have spent most of their adult lives in art and design institutions - interviews, studios, tutorials, group 'crits', seminars and assessments are very much within their comfort zone.

What many HE lecturers fail to understand is that art schools and departments can be very scary places for the uninitiated. They are perceived to be the domain of the talented. Strange and magical places where interesting people do weird and unpredictable things that are understood only by initiates. It seems that art lecturers do not fully grasp the sense of perplexity and vulnerability that many of our students feel yet are unable to express.

At this year's GLAD (Group for Learning in Art and Design) conference in Cambridge, Sir Michael Bichard expressed deep concern about worrying inconsistencies in the way we interview potential students and the woeful lack of interview training received by staff. Perhaps we should worry that, when it comes to interviewing new students, we do not insist on the high level of objectivity and transparency that we demand when, later, we assess them. Interviews are not, by and large, observed, monitored or quality assured.

Grayson Perry was spot on when he wrote in February the 28th's edition of the Times:

The big factor in preventing applicants from poorer backgrounds getting into art school is prejudice at the interview stage... At the age of 19 most talent has not blossomed so interviewers are looking for glimmers of potential.

'[...] Faced with a choice of two equally promising portfolios - one from a charming girl who reads The Guardian over her croissant, who has good eye contact, and quotes all the expected cultural references, and one from a monosyllabic youth dressed for CCTV whose passion for culture is hidden beneath a cloak of impenetrable cool - who do you think they choose? Who will they look forward to spending time with over the next three years [...] »

So let us challenge our assumptions that interviews are fair, properly transparent and objective and provide a genuinely effective level of equality of access.

But of course, WP is not just about recruiting students, it's about keeping them - the CHEAD Report notes that:

'[...] a surprising number of students highlighted a lack of confidence about HE art and design. Students talked about lack of confidence in relation to different stages of the student life-cycle'

It is here that I think much more research needs to be done. We need better data-based evidence of the stresses and strains that are an inherent part of student life. We need better mapping of student withdrawals and interruptions. We need to develop more sophisticated exit analysis. We need to look for the links between withdrawals, their timing and reasons and our students' individual profiles, the course calendar and the more unpredictable peaks and troughs of the student life-cycle. When a student succumbs, it is convenient but not good enough for a Course Leader to accept 'personal reasons' as an explanation for withdrawal.

However, Student Support staff, often working under confidentiality, are far more aware than their academic colleagues of the anxieties that many students face when it comes to acclimatising to new learning experiences, making friends, writing an essay, giving a presentation, meeting deadlines, receiving negative tutorial feedback, the lack of overt encouragement, the cost of an educational visit, not to mention student debt and anxieties and embarrassments related to complex domestic problems or mental health issues.

Even everyday encounters can create anxiety. Presentations in front of peers or even asking a question are, for some, white knuckle experiences. At the NALN conference at the Tate earlier this year, research by Blair, Blythman and Orr shone a light onto that great art school tradition, the studio 'crit', and in doing so painted a vivid picture of a linguistic battlefield that would test the resilience of the most adept student.

We happily accept the idea that studio discourse can be personal and healthily confrontational. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the CHEAD Report reveals the potentially powerful influences (negative and positive) of art and design teachers. To quote the report:

Data revealed that even brief interactions with teachers and lecturers can influence students' decision making about and experience of HE art and Design. (Many of us will have wryly noted that reference to 'even brief interactions' as if nowadays there was still a possibility for long interactions).

It is a great pity that the CHEAD/ACE research was not able to access more subject specific data for art and design rather than having to roll many subjects up under the single heading of 'Design'. It would have been interesting to see different patterns emerging from, for example, Fashion, 3D and Graphics.



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I have no doubt that if we were to tease apart data from the various subject sub-sets we would begin to see that they too have their own internal cultures that predispose them to being attractive or hostile environments to those from differing backgrounds or circumstance.

And what of the bigger picture? The Government is already stepping back from its 50% target for participation in HE. The latest demographic data from HEFCE clearly shows that, from 2010, not only will there be a significant downturn in numbers applying to HE but, importantly, the greatest downward demographic shift will be from those applying from the lower socio-economic groups. If this prediction is correct, then individuals from the lower socio-economic groups will continue to feel marginalised and alienated.

When it comes to making investments, families are not unlike nations. However rich a country's heritage and culture may be, if it is poor and dependant, it will spend more on meeting the priorities of food production, trade or defence. Likewise, students that come from families that aren't socially or economically secure or those who have physical or mental disabilities, are under significant pressure to be risk-averse.

We forget that, to many out there, the visual arts are a luxury subject. We under-estimate the huge confidence that is needed to be a risk-taker who doesn't have the safety nets provided by the great white middle class. Despite the much-heralded growth in the Creative Industries, the truth is that gaining employment in the SME dominated Creative Industries is hard and almost always needs a measure of pecuniary immunity and social dexterity in addition to innate talent.

The Government is pushing hard on its 14 to 19 agenda but as yet, there are reservations as to whether the new Creative and Media Diploma will release the untapped talent of our inner-city and rural communities. Despite being designed to appeal equally to the most able, there is little doubt that it is being targeted at school pupils who are not destined to succeed at traditional 'gold standard' GCSEs and A-levels.

Employability is probably the very ingredient that will attract and retain a WP student. But the reality is that we, as receiving HEIs, don't really want to see interview portfolios that look as though they are put together by sensible people looking for a job.

It is interesting to note that Creative and Media has been grouped with such subjects as hair and beauty, construction, hospitality and catering and travel and tourism - all subjects with a primarily Level 3 employment profile. As we know, art, design and media is an almost exclusively graduate employment market, yet pervading the new creative Diploma is a strong element of employability. Students as young as fifteen will be able to opt for modules in such highly specialist areas as animation or games design or footwear. What is worrying is that the new Diploma is likely to raise aspirations that will then be dashed by our current art school systems.

We can't knock the new Diploma for seeking to focus on employability. In fact, employability is probably the very ingredient that will attract and retain a WP student. But the reality is that we, as receiving HEIs, don't really want to see interview portfolios that look as though they are put together by sensible people looking for a job.

Moreover, the introduction of demand-led funding through such instruments as HE tuition fees, increases in FE adult fee contributions and extending purchasing power through Learner Accounts and Train to Gain and, of course, the recent Leitch Report, all this has put a question mark over the Government's stated claim to put the learner at the centre of the delivery system.

Leitch's language is about measuring UK performance and wage returns and the notion that qualifications, and their funding, must be driven by employers and employability. The Leitch emphasis is on economically valuable skills - but at what cost? - learning is far more than utilitarian. Moreover, Leitch tends to predicate his employability arguments on the notion of employers being medium to large companies - which certainly does not reflect job opportunities in the creative industries.

These are confusing times for both learners and providers. At the secondary level, local schools consortia are championing new vocational qualifications whilst still retaining the old 'gold standard' exams. FE colleges are racing to add more and more HE to their provision. Extended hours, bite-sized flexible provision, foundation degrees, blended and personal learning should all, in effect, be contributing to widening participation.

So is it time to ponder whether our art schools and university departments of art and design may be surprisingly conservative places? In the changing educational arena, are we continuing to champion excellence but accepting elitism as its unavoidable corollary?

Yes, we probably do need top-down national and institutional policies aimed at raising aspirations and breaking down barriers to HE participation in art, design and media. But fundamentally, WP, like art and design education, is about understanding and celebrating the individual. Inclusivity, like creativity, happens at a personal level. •