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### Citation for published version:

Patterson, Z 2018, Design agencies within university and designers in residence within school. in *INTED 2018 Proceedings: 12th International Technology, Education and Development Conference, 5-7 March, 2018 Valencia (Spain)*. IATED Academy, Valencia, pp. 1652-1657. <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2018.0286>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.21125/inted.2018.0286](https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2018.0286)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### Published In:

INTED 2018 Proceedings

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# DESIGN AGENCIES WITHIN UNIVERSITY AND DESIGNERS IN RESIDENCE WITHIN SCHOOL

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## Abstract

Nine years since its inception, *Design Agency* is the flagship means by which students on the Graphic Design Degree Programme at Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh graduate from four years of full-time education with an honours degree and, simultaneously, 3-4 years of work experience. Winner of the Guardian University Awards 2013 prize for Employability Initiative [1], it was the first project of its kind in the UK.

From day one, fledgling students secure 'employment' as interns within student-led design agencies along with peers from all levels of the programme. This scheme has addressed government and industries concern over graduate readiness of the professional world [2] and has allowed students to experience work-like scenarios within the safety of the academic environment. Developing rounded, 'real world' skill sets, such as pitching, delegating and networking, students are on a meteoric learning curve. Whilst success of our graduates has been apparent, our mantra is that they are 100% employable, the type of University/Design-ready applicants recruited to the graphics programme has been limited. *Designer in Residence* was created whereby final year undergraduate students, otherwise known as Creative Directors, from each student agency, have been challenged on a weekly basis to embed themselves within a local primary or secondary school as resident designers. This initiative responds to *Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy* [2] to improve young people's ability to make informed decisions about future pathways and specifically for our design staff, helping young people understand the wealth of study and career opportunities within the (graphic) design sector. This work in progress aims to bridge the gap between schools and university just as the *Design Agency* project has between university and industry.

Keywords: Employability, Graphic Design, Professional, Collaboration, Skill Set, Risk, Career, Journey, Mentorship.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Annually, the final (4<sup>th</sup>) year students on the Graphic Design Programme at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) form design agencies which operate as profit-generating companies. They brand and advertise vacancies at all levels, from interns (1<sup>st</sup> Year), junior designers (2<sup>nd</sup> Year) to senior designers (3<sup>rd</sup> Year), for which students are shortlisted, interviewed and appointed. Established design professionals provide voluntary dedicated mentorship, with further guidance given by The University of Edinburgh's Careers Service, Human Resource and Enterprise departments. Students themselves will experience life in 3-4 different design agencies throughout their time at ECA. The long-term relationships that are built with both mentors and peers ensures the students have the chance to show, over a period of years, what they can contribute.

*Design Agency* provides vertical integration involving *all* undergraduate students on the programme all way through the academic year. It is rare in academia that students work across the year groups in such a sustained way, even though the potency of peer feedback is undoubted. Keith H. Blanchard's adage "none of us is as smart as all of us" [3] goes a little way to support the benefits of peer-assisted learning. Hill, Gay and Topping see it as an "experience [that] in various forms can become a normal lifelong expectation... [that]... everyone can expect to participate at different stages as tutor and tutee, leader and follower" [4, p. 291].

Within *Design Agency*, regardless of age or experience, but based on ability, students work collectively towards a common objective. Responding to self-initiated and commercial projects, *Design Agency* offers a highly fluid process of reflection, experimentation, risk-taking and consolidation. One mentor sums this up as, "for me [the agency project] gives the students an awareness of the professional requirements of being a designer beyond designing." Teaching staff have seen a marked increase in student confidence, including among students with less creative skillsets. This approach

embodies Kincheloe and Steinberg's "students as researchers" [5], the goal being to generate "student production of alternate bodies of knowledge" [5].

Recently our student agencies have been tasked with problem solving high school pupils' lack of knowledge of design-related career opportunities through two projects, a test project entitled *Graphic Design in a Box* and a work in progress called *Designer in Residence* (Des Res).

Creative careers advice at high school level is limited, students are encouraged to take the initiative in exploring options open to them within their area of interest. Pupils often have basic knowledge of what these options are and where trustworthy information can be sourced. If pupils don't know what graphic design is, or there is a disconnect between what they are taught at secondary school and what we expect of them at university, then applicants' portfolios (which are requested as part of The Design School's admissions process) are on the back foot. In a 2012 report commissioned by Edinburgh College of Art's Access to Creative Education in Scotland [ACES] project [6], local school teachers interviewed commented on art schools being "too elitist" and "difficult to get into". For these reasons, they often advised alternative routes to progression to their pupils rather than direct application to university. At the time a recommendation was made to "strengthen links between art colleges and school art department/guidance staff" [6]. It is incumbent upon us to be mindful of Mickletwaite's comments about "predetermined personal route[s] into art and design [being] linked to underachievement in other areas" [7]. Despite that, a rudimentary overview of figures from applications (Scottish and European Union 'SEU' home fee paying applicants plus Rest of UK 'RUK') to the Graphic Design Programme at ECA during the 2017 admissions cycle paint a different and surprising picture. Of the 335 applications to 1<sup>st</sup> Year level, 223 had benchmark academic grades but the portfolio component was unsatisfactory. At 2<sup>nd</sup> Year entry, 53 of the 105 applicants did not meet the portfolio criteria despite having benchmark academic grades.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The impetus for the *Graphic Design in a Box* component of the *Design Agency* scheme came from a frustration that the demographic of students to our programme with diverse backgrounds from across the UK had seemingly narrowed (after formal merger with the University in 2011 entry requirements began to change). Scotland has the lowest rate of University participation by students from the poorest neighbourhoods [8]. With many innovative widening participation initiatives taking place within and outwith the University our approach was to challenge our own final year undergraduate students to create a design output responding to this issue.

The initial three-week project brought final year graphic design students together with University careers advisers, experts in widening participation, and recent graduates, taking ECA out of the College and into the classroom to introduce high school learners to creative careers pathways.

Creative Directors (18 final year students age range 20-24) from each design agency were tasked with creating a tool or system in order to support careers guidance staff and subject teachers when speaking to their pupils about career options within the creative sector. The project asked University students to use their graphic design skills to showcase how content, context and career opportunities could be disseminated by teachers to pupils neither of whom have any sustained or first-hand knowledge of the subject matter. Students were asked to think of this project as offering advice to their younger-selves; personal anecdotes and memories being part of the research undertaken.

Nigel Cross acknowledges the roles and differences between teaching levels [9]. Traditionally design tutors being practising designers who pass on their specialist knowledge through a process of apprenticeship. These tutors more designer than teacher "but in general education all teachers are (or should be) firstly teachers, and only secondly, if at all, specialists in any field" [9].

The Directors created workshops at a local high school in Edinburgh where talks and games were interspersed with demonstrations of prototype tools and concepts designed by the University students, enabling the young learners to provide constructive feedback on ideas during development. The results from each team were disseminated through an interactive exhibition, well attended by school pupils, parents, teachers and university staff. The creative outcomes were one aspect of this initiative but the real success was the act of bringing the subject of graphic design in a tangible way into the heart of the world of the young learners, and by way of a bonus, introducing The University of Edinburgh as a potential stepping stone to a creative career. In Schank, Berman and Macphersons "goal based scenarios", knowing how to use the knowledge obtained is intrinsic to these type of

projects: “There is only one effective way to teach someone how to do anything, and that is to let them do it” [10].

As an anecdotal aside one of the exhibition outcomes was developed by two final year students into a nationwide ‘I Don’t Know’ (IDK) Festival for school pupils between the ages 14-17 to help them discover different disciplines within the creative world. This proposal was subsequently shortlisted for the 2017 Deutsche Bank Awards for Creative Enterprise [11].

Jump forward to this academic year and a development of the project is currently taking place entitled *Designer in Residence*, whereby a Creative Director from each student design agency has been challenged, on a weekly basis, to embed themselves within a local primary or secondary school as resident designer. Logan describes graphic design knowledge as being “in circulation in the learning environment, [students] seeing themselves as one of the entities it flow[s] through” [12].

Although Hill, Gay & Topping suggest “recent research provides no conclusive evidence for aspirational gains in tutees resulting from student tutoring” [4, p. 294], I hope to beg to differ at the end of this experience when the project concludes in April 2018.

### 3 RESULTS

2016 graduate Natasha Goldstein, winner of the David Pearl Prize at The New Entrepreneurs Foundation [13], reports:

“The (*Design Agency*) element changed the course for me, as it allowed me to take risks, make mistakes and learn from them in a safe space. Practicing leadership, communication and organisation, equally important skills to accompany design thinking has been vital to giving me the confidence to set up my own practice.”

*Design Agency* has had a major impact on the Graphic Design curriculum at ECA, as a result of its success it is soon to become a 40 credit course in its own right as opposed to a project embedded within a course. In session 2018/19 it will also open its doors to a wider community from across the University whereby students from any discipline can take part as interns and/or junior designers alongside senior graphic designers.

Mentors have commented on how *Design Agency* redresses growing industry concern over graduate readiness for work and how it has helped convey, to students, what a design consultancy is looking for in a graduate and their portfolio. They have also spoken about the benefit, to them, of working with people who have “explosive and infectious energy and passion”, demonstrating that the benefit is mutual. One mentor details how their experience of mentoring had helped them strengthen their own communication and feedback skills, and in this way the process has had benefits outside of the college environment.

As well as allowing students to learn and develop skills, *Design Agency* is helpful in assisting students to find out what they do and do not want to do in the future: “It has taught me the vast skill set needed to run your own agency, and the importance of teamwork to make it work! It has also made me realise that I prefer to be given direction, rather than direct.” Another student offers:

“Over the course of three years in the *Design Agency* scheme, the idea of what I would like to do in the future has completely changed. In second year I thought I wanted to work for a small studio working on briefs that were only focused on branding but now I would like to work in a studio where I can work on a range of briefs and more into the production side of things. It has also made me realise that I do not want to set up my own design studio yet. I would like to gain experience and learn from the best. I am not ready to be a creative director just yet!”

The more specific *Graphic Design in a Box* project received feedback from a Creative Director, “Like no other project I have done previously, I got a real-life problem that I got to actually solve and I inspired the student I got to work with, which is beyond rewarding!!”.

Limits to the project were inevitable, group dynamics and imbalance in group workload played their part. Benefits and challenges of group interaction are discussed by Jaques who summarises, “an effective group will have common shared aims and differentiated individual aims” [14]. Fellenz’s Groupwork Peer-Evaluation Protocol (GPEP) enables the assessment of individual contributions to graded student groupwork [15], but we bypass this type of evaluation in favour of personalised reflection. For instance, from one Year 4 University student: “Frustrating, educational, enlightening but not an experience I’d repeat”, and another: “Stressful at the beginning due to adjusting to roles,

ambitious idea that succeeded due to good organisation but tense at times (who was doing most or least work).”

Asked if they would re-consider a subject or career choice based on this new information a majority of the participating high school pupils fed back they felt encouraged and more curious about disciplines within design. But of course there are some things you just can't compete with, one reply, “No because law is a higher paid opportunity”.

An unexpected but welcome development was the interest from the Universities Career Service, questioning their own perspectives and how they might take account of the “sustainability, updateability and reproduceability” of some of the proposals produced.

Specifically related to the *Designer in Residence* initiative staff and students have had some interesting and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about learning journeys. Surprising outcomes have been the reflections of the University students themselves and their re-imagining of their own career paths, the obstacles they have overcome since deciding on a design career, and the confidence gained.

Aspects students have found challenging throughout the agency and related projects is working with others that they do not necessarily 'click with'. Overcoming issues in relation to working with conflicting personalities was just as frequently commented on as being a positive learning experience. One student observes, “even the difficult parts like friction between people and ideas is great. The worse things get the better they are to reflect on and learn from.” Reflection is important to short-term problem solving and to the design process as a whole but also provides our learners with a means to analyse themselves and their contribution. This important stage of the learning process is examined in detail by Ellmers who warns of problem-based learning focusing on the artefact [16], and the student being “at risk of learning little from the design process itself... [whereby]... it is not always clear to the student what exactly they have learnt... [and if so]... then it is likely to impact on their ability to transfer their learning” [16]. *Design Agency*, over the 3-4 years of its lifespan for each student, allows a deeper and sustained approach to working in varied conditions on varied projects with different peers and mentors. University careers staff support students to harness this reflection with workshops and discussion, all of which helps form the basis of summative assessment submissions through individual video diaries and personalised data.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

In order to respond to the ever-changing landscape of design and the expectations of its stakeholders, *Design Agency* project, its content, teaching and learning methods are in continual flux. The *Designer in Residence* component is a live project and as such data must be captured and analysed. Evidenced through an internally commissioned Design Agency Project Report [17] the majority of Creative Directors have enjoyed leading an agency, completing the projects within and can see the benefits in terms of transferable skills. Through taking part they have been able to both identify their own strengths and work on their weaknesses. When students did have negative experiences they were able to reflect on this and learn from it. Where they had problems they were able to work on them to a successful outcome, they show resilience and resourcefulness, growing more confident in their abilities:

“...teach students by providing them with rich experiences in which they desire to perform skills in order to accomplish motivating goals. The way in which they practice the skills should closely relate to how they will use the skills outside the learning environment” [10, p. 166].

Through *Curriculum for Excellence* [18] “...young people are learning crucial new skills... [in order to]... make positive and well-informed choices about jobs and careers throughout their learning journey” [19]. The National Parent Forum of Scotland has visualised an approach *From Skills to Careers* whereby college-school partnerships deliver courses and students on college courses are provided opportunities for University [19]. For our part the *Designer in Residence* scheme supports young(er) learners in their understanding of the life of, not only a graphic designer, but that of a mature learner post-school, widening understanding and participation.

*Design Agency* and its component parts *Graphic Design in a Box* and the on-going *Designer in Residence* are multi-faceted and layered. This is important work to continue in order that we might help broaden the landscape of successful applications to the programme, strengthen the portfolio

component and help to convince young learners, their parents/carers and teachers the value of creativity and design as a fulfilling and viable career choice.

To reach the conclusion of a paper scholars within the University advise “If you had to tell someone in a lift what the value of this work was, what would you say”. I think this can be best answered by a small but highly significant observation I made. A primary school teacher introducing her “Art” class to a group of young learners coughed, paused and then corrected herself: “Design”.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to Ian Sharman, colleague and friend, for his knowledge and advise.

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