

## Makers in focus

### Executive summary

Heather Rigg



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The working environment of West Midlands designer makers, craftspeople and applied artists at different stages of their careers.

Survey: 2003-04

Report: 2005

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'Cherry Trifle From Bilston' – Vitreous enamel copper box by John Grayson

Commissioned by Bilston Craft Gallery. Part funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council.

# 1 Executive summary

## 1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 The University of Wolverhampton and Arts Council England, West Midlands jointly set up and funded a three-year, part-time research fellowship with the aim of achieving a greater understanding of the needs of makers in the West Midlands region, their working lives and professional activities. It set out particularly to explore the regional retention of emerging graduates, strategies for attracting new makers to the West Midlands, and raising the profile of makers and the applied arts in the region.
- 1.1.2 *Makers in focus* is the first study of its kind to address the West Midlands as a whole, and aims to provide evidence in support of establishing a regional strategy for professional development.
- 1.1.3 The survey, *Makers in focus* was undertaken to explore current activity in the sector and to identify needs and gaps in the provision of professional development support. Separate questionnaires were sent to listed makers (ie those listed on a range of crafts databases, understood within the sector as providing registers of UK makers who are actively practising and marketing their work), and to emerging graduates (ie craft or design graduates emerging from five West Midlands higher educational institutions in 2003).
- 1.1.4 Recognising that people producing crafts use a varied terminology to describe themselves, this report deploys the term 'maker' to encompass practitioners who might variously describe themselves as craftspeople, designer makers and applied artists.
- 1.1.5 It deploys the term 'market' to refer not only to the processes by which craft or applied artworks are bought or sold, and the various contexts in which this activity takes place, but also to non-commercial opportunities and activities that expose makers to new experiences, new audiences, new work and new exhibition opportunities, and that result in the raising of their profiles. All of these activities collectively comprise 'the economy' of the applied arts sector.

## 1.2 Key points

- 1.2.1 **All of the major research conducted into makers' lifestyles and working practices in the last decade characterises them as multi-tasking portfolio workers.**



Understanding makers in this way demands new definitions of professional success, and a shift in understanding of the requirements of effective professional development support for their professional and creative development.

- 1.2.2 **It is a widely held view that generic business skills training is of limited value: makers do not usually associate themselves with business attitudes and lifestyles, even though they are clearly running small businesses.**

Professional development has to be relevant, specific, flexible, accessible and tailored to this attitude, lifestyle and approach if it is to be effective in delivering the business and entrepreneurial skills that makers require to be successful.

- 1.2.3 **If most public investment in professional development is short-term, there is little or no prospect of sustained development, or proper exploitation or rolling out of good practice.**

Professional development continues to change and evolve, but the long-term potential of many initiatives is not being exploited: much short-term investment is limited in its effect and, ultimately, a wasteful use of public resource.

- 1.2.4 **While there are a number of models of good practice in the West Midlands, there has been limited consideration of how and to what extent *tailored* professional development provision is effectively aligned with the region's regeneration agenda.**

Despite growing governmental emphasis on graduate retention and encouraging the growth of small and medium enterprises, especially in relation to the creative industries, professional development tailored to the needs of makers remains relatively little engaged in the encouragement of entrepreneurship.

- 1.2.5 **As matters currently stand, the majority of professional development has been created largely independently of consideration for the support and development of markets, or of development of any professional or creative opportunities and activities for makers. What makers want from professional development, above all else, is to enhance their capacity to develop new markets, especially new selling and exhibiting opportunities.**

- 1.2.6 Current thinking is not making the crucial connection between makers' primary, artistic motivation for their practices, the fundamental requirement to find a market outlet if they are to be successful, and the nature of professional development provision.
- The survival and success of makers ultimately depends upon increasing the overall level of professional activity and business opportunities that are available to them. Without markets, makers and the craft sector do not exist.**
- 1.2.7 Greater attempts need to be made to create imaginative programmes and schemes that appeal to makers, and which can produce positive, real and tangible benefits to practitioners and their role within the regional economy.
- 1.2.8 Partnerships and collaborations between professional development providers and arts organisations and agencies are essential to the survival and profiling of professional development initiatives.
- 1.2.9 Higher educational institutions have not yet fulfilled their potential to play a significant role in the development of professional development provision and in the West Midlands' retention of emerging makers.
- 1.2.10 Successful professional development schemes play a direct role in raising the profile of makers, and of the region as a worthwhile place for makers to base themselves and their businesses.
- 1.2.11 The loss of young graduates from the region is alarming given the West Midlands' very strong tradition and international reputation for design, making and manufacturing in ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent, and jewellery in Birmingham.
- 1.2.12 Arts Council England, West Midlands' declining capacity and flexibility to make direct strategic investment in the sector, and the fragmented nature of existing professional development provision, is of considerable significance to the region's performance and potential as an attractive base for makers.
- 1.2.13 Listed makers in the West Midlands are mostly female, work from home, practice in a rural area and have portfolio careers, juggling several professional activities at once.



Their participation rate in professional development activities is low, with 41% having undertaken no such activity in the last three years. Makers living in rural areas are less likely to be involved in professional development activity than makers in urban areas.

1.2.14

**Listed makers want to find and take advantage of professional development opportunities and activities.**

Participation in mentoring schemes and critical debate - types of development currently favoured by providers in other parts of the country - are not rated highly. Instead, makers value support to enable them to access a wider range of regional, national and international opportunities and activities.

1.2.15

**Makers continue to use newsletters more than the internet as a source of information.**

They value sourcing information by means of arts and crafts publications; they also value peer group networking through makers' groups or guilds, which are viewed as a means to overcome isolation at work.

1.2.16 **Emerging makers are invisible and under-represented on databases.**

Only 5% of respondents who were listed makers and practising for two years or less, and 21% of respondents who were graduates emerging from the region's higher educational institutions, appeared on crafts databases or lists.

1.2.17 **Those emerging makers who are listed on databases (and therefore visible) are very active.**

The nine (5%) respondents who fall into this category and who have been practising for 0-2 years are very proactive and entrepreneurial, with eight having made successful funding applications in support of their practices and all selling and exhibiting work while sustaining portfolio careers.

1.2.18 **Listed makers in the region are generally pro-active in selling and exhibiting their work.**

Galleries, shops, craft fairs and private commissions are the most cited outlets.

1.2.19 **For over half of West Midlands makers, the region does not provide a big enough market for their work and national markets are their main targets.**

1.2.20 **Makers selling in the region are not reliant on the tourist trade: their customers are local people.**



Three steel vessels with moon gold by Claire Malet  
Photo by Anthony Evans Copyright: Claire Malet

1.2.21 **West Midlands makers are already proactive in accessing international markets.**

They identify developing new opportunities internationally as one of the three most necessary areas of support if they are to further the success and growth of their practices.

1.2.22 **Listed makers are primarily concerned with making and their creativity needs nurturing.**

Makers identify the need to have more time to develop and explore their creative work as well as to develop market opportunities in the region, nationally and internationally. Government focus on economic development and the creative industries has meant a greater emphasis on business and productivity and less emphasis on the nurturing of creativity. Makers want to produce high quality work and future professional development policies should take this into consideration.

1.2.23 **Were additional finance available, emerging graduates would first want to invest in the purchase of equipment, the purchase of raw materials and studio premises.**

These are the basic, fundamental needs of a maker wanting to start up a studio. Investing in business training is identified as the second stage of setting up a business.

1.2.24 **West Midlands makers' turnover appears to be significantly lower than the national average.**

The mean average turnover for a full-time craftsman in the West Midlands is £15,000 less than the average turnover in England and Wales, which is £35,000 per annum.

1.2.25 **Based on individuals' estimated mean turnover, West Midlands makers generate an estimated £32 million per annum.**

1.2.26 **The average annual turnover for a full-time female maker is over £9,000 less than her male counterpart.**

1.2.27 Unlike listed makers, emerging graduates tend to live in urban areas. The majority are female, with textiles the most represented craftform.

**Almost a third of those studying at the region's universities move away from the region on graduating.**

- 1.2.28 **The majority of graduates have received professional development support as an element of their BA study, and professional development seems to be valued.**
- After graduation, over half continue actively to research professional development opportunities, but a quarter are not aware of any professional development opportunities offered within their region.
- 1.2.29 **Exhibiting at *New Designers* is a positive learning experience for emerging graduates.**
- They gain valuable professional and business contacts, skills and knowledge within a live professional context.
- 1.2.30 **Emerging graduates show early signs of entrepreneurship.**
- They seem to be motivated, with one third of them accessing UK markets as early as five months after leaving university. However they want support, identifying their needs as attainment of a reasonably priced studio and financial assistance with business start-up costs (including the acquisition of materials and equipment).
- 1.2.31 **A rethink of professional development provision is needed in the light of the survey's findings.**
- Providers must reconsider their current attitudes to professional development, and place new emphasis upon how they can contribute to the development of markets and other professional opportunities for makers. Makers are not accessing markets to their full potential, and their current market share is unnecessarily limited for want of appropriate advice, assistance and support.
- 1.2.32 **Professional development is reliant on short-term funding.**
- This impacts negatively on providers' capacity to build on their knowledge and experience and, consequently, upon both regional and national capacity to deepen and strengthen professional development support and provision.
- 1.2.33 **While the research has identified some models of good practice in professional development provision in the region, activity is un-coordinated. A coordinating, strategic regional framework is needed to build on existing strengths and to promote and enhance the capacity of the region's makers to access international and national activity and opportunities.**



## 2

# Strategy and recommendations

- Development of a region-wide infrastructure for professional development: recommendations and action points
- Creating a dynamic, supportive culture for makers, their practices and their markets: recommendations and action points
- The role of higher education: recommendations and action points

2.1

## **Development of a region-wide infrastructure for professional development: recommendations**

- a) National mapping undertaken during the early stages of the fellowship highlighted the value of partnerships and collaborations to successful, strategic development and delivery of professional development.
- b) A West Midlands professional development framework for the applied arts is needed if a cohesive regional professional development infrastructure is to be created. This should be effected through formation of an independent consortium comprising existing professional development organisations in the region. The consortium would aim to build on existing strengths, share skills, expertise and resources, maximise collective effectiveness, eradicate duplication and address gaps in provision. To ensure the involvement of the rural and sub regions, members should be broadly representative of all areas of the West Midlands. The consortium's aim should be to support makers' success in regional, national and international markets through development and implementation of a strategic direction for professional development provision.
- c) Key players in the consortium:
  - Arts Council England, West Midlands
  - Advantage West Midlands
  - arts development agencies
  - arts and crafts organisations
  - higher educational institutions
  - existing professional development providers
  - galleries
  - local authorities
- d) The aims of a crafts professional development framework in the West Midlands region:



- advocate for professional development
- articulate a future direction for professional development
- broker partnership funding and develop a funding strategy for professional development provision
- achieve an effective means of distributing professional development information and opportunities
- provide a virtual 'centre' for professional development activity and provision
- deliver support to makers through strategic professional development initiatives
- ensure effective links between urban, rural and local areas

2.2

### **Development of a region-wide infrastructure for professional development: action points**

- a) Appoint a paid project manager to coordinate the consortium and lead on professional development initiatives and recommendations.
- b) Identify named representatives of potential consortium member organisations and begin by establishing a mechanism for pooling information resources and databases.
- c) Identify appropriate organisational and staff structure for an independent consortium.



- d) Disseminate summary of key points from the *Makers in focus* report to West Midlands professional development organisations, development agencies, local authorities and higher educational institutions.
- e) Monitor makers' needs on an ongoing basis to maintain an appropriate and effective balance of provision across the region and to achieve introduction of new, additional provision where necessary.
- f) Develop and maintain a regional database of makers, including all recent applied arts graduates from the region's higher educational institutions, to ensure effective communication to makers.
- g) Develop a website with links regionally, nationally and internationally (possibly to be achieved through partnership with Creative People).
- h) Promote professional development through conferences and other appropriate professional forums.
- i) Broker partnership funding for the implementation of this report's recommendations and associated professional development initiatives.

Assembled fish made from ceramics and recycled materials by Ros Ingram.  
Photo: Cliff Guttridge

2.3

### **Creating a dynamic, supportive culture for makers, their practices and their markets: recommendations**

- a) Makers' development is dependent upon their being aware of both the market and professional development opportunities that are potentially available to them. Coordinated, effective communication on the part of institutions, organisations and providers with an interest in developing and sustaining a flourishing, entrepreneurial community of makers in the region is therefore essential.
- b) To this end, achieving and maintaining visibility for emerging graduates is key, as is providing appropriate, effective support for start-up of their businesses and ongoing, integral development of their creative practices.
- c) More established makers need assistance to revitalise their businesses, including making time to extend their work creatively.
- d) All makers need access to appropriate and often highly specialised equipment; equally, they need support to expand and grow their markets, and to promote their work successfully regionally, nationally and internationally.
- e) Rural makers need particular consideration to ensure that they are able to access opportunities and expertise perhaps more readily available to practitioners located in the region's urban centres.

2.4

### **Creating a dynamic, supportive culture for makers, their practices and their markets: action points**

- a) Disseminate the key findings of *Makers in focus* through makers' guilds, associations, groups and national publications.
- b) Develop and maintain a West Midlands database of makers and professional development providers.
- c) Develop a dedicated professional development website or newsletter to provide information and advice to West Midlands makers on regional, national and international markets and funding.
- d) Develop professional development conferences and seminar days in support of makers' creative, professional and entrepreneurial development.
- e) Assist and encourage studio groups to network informally regionally, nationally and internationally.

- f) Assist and encourage studio groups to develop their own websites to showcase makers' work.
- g) Support existing guilds and makers' groups to develop and promote new events and activities to attract emerging makers.
- h) Develop student and emerging makers' membership of associations, guilds and groups.
- i) Deploy *New Designers* as a forum for recruitment and as a launch pad for initiatives specifically tailored to the needs of emerging makers.
- j) Implement a research project into the development of studio provision for emerging graduates and makers, towards encouraging graduate retention within the region.
- k) Undertake action research projects into the development and implementation of makers' market opportunities regionally, nationally and internationally. Suggested projects to focus on the development of public art and opportunities for mid-career makers.
- l) Expand West Midlands higher educational institutions' participation in the national *Artists Access to Art Colleges* (AA2A) scheme.
- m) Support new studio groups to share resources.
- n) Increase training provision offering practical support and advice to makers to develop promotional tools.
- o) Develop a programme of partnerships between higher educational institutions and other organisations to develop makers' access to studios, equipment, materials, networking and training, in a supportive environment. Each partnership could provide a regional focus for a particular craft discipline.
- p) Negotiate partnerships with national organisations to develop greater participation in national selling and exhibiting opportunities.
- q) Support access to, and the development of, regional, national and international opportunities for makers.
- r) Stage a national conference on the development of markets and opportunities for makers.



## 2.5

### **The role of higher education: recommendations**

- a) Achievement of a flourishing crafts sector within the West Midlands, which can make a growing contribution to regional regeneration, is highly dependent upon rendering the region a more attractive environment for young makers and their businesses. In part, this will involve growing its capacity to retain graduates emerging from its higher educational institutions, and enhancing those graduates' professional and entrepreneurial effectiveness.
- b) In this context, higher educational institutions' effective delivery of professional development to their students becomes crucial, as does achievement of greater support structures for young graduates once they leave to enter professional practice.

- c) Higher educational institutions should also be recognised as offering significant and largely untapped potential for playing a greater role in professional development provision overall. Within the broad understanding and remit of professional development that this report advocates, they should be understood to be key players in the development of the crafts sector in the region. Through partnerships and collaborations with other organisations, they can make a significant contribution to the infrastructural resource that, through effective, region-wide coordination, can be unlocked in the service of makers' development.

2.6

### The role of higher education: action points

- a) Embed professional development as an overt and integrated element of all BA and MA courses.
- b) Develop 'follow up' schemes, in partnership with external, specialist organisations, to support emerging graduates to follow up and capitalise upon contacts achieved at *New Designers*.
- c) Work in partnership with other providers to achieve networking and other professional development events and schemes suitable for emerging and established makers in the region.
- d) Play a greater role in non-accredited professional development provision.
- e) Develop a partnership scheme between higher educational institutions and other organisations to create supportive environments through which makers can access studios, equipment, materials, networking and training. Each partnership could provide a regional focus for a particular craft discipline.
- f) Look to *Next Move* and existing North West and North Yorkshire schemes for models of some aspects of the above proposals.



Blue-green bracelet from the Elytra collection by John Moore

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