

Research paper

Professional practice in art schools: preparing students for life after graduation

How do fine art courses prepare their students for life after art school? How is professional practice shaped by factors such as location, course philosophy, and the cultural and political climate? Sarah Rowles unpacks the findings of a new publication she has co-edited with Jo Allen, *Professional Practice: 20 Questions – Interviews with UK undergraduate Fine Art staff exploring how students are prepared for life after art school.*

For Q-Art's latest publication *Professional Practice: 20 Questions*, Jo Allen and Sarah Rowles asked fine art staff from around the UK to explore how undergraduate fine art courses prepare their students for life after art school, and to share examples of their own approaches and philosophies.

In this Research paper, Rowles introduces some of the findings of the book, and reflects how things have changed since 2013 when her initial a-n commissioned report on professional practice in art schools identified how targeted approaches vary considerably from institution to institution.

Sarah Rowles is founding Director of Q-Art, an organisation she set up in 2008 whilst a BA fine art student at Goldsmiths, University of London, which aims to break down barriers to further and higher level art education and contemporary art. In addition to running Q-Art she is an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a World Economic Forum Global Shaper. She is also on the steering group of the National Association of Fine Art Education and a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Art, Craft and Design Education.

In my a-n commissioned report *The lay of the land* (researched in 2012; published 2013), I spoke with staff from sixteen fine art and nine applied art undergraduate courses in the UK about their approaches to preparing students for life after the course. The aim of the study was to: compare approaches and attitudes towards delivery on fine and applied art courses; assess what effect, if any, the then impending tuition fee rise would have on professional practice delivery (from 2012 universities in England were able to charge tuition fees of up to £9,000 per year for home and EU students); and compare how provision had changed since a 1992 a-n report on the topic.

The lay of the land gave examples of embedded and distinct provision offered within the courses; of extra-curricular provision and support offered by university careers services; and it began to hint at some of the challenges and opportunities faced by courses in different parts of the UK as they considered how best to prepare students for life after art school. Three central concerns raised by staff were: How might they equip students with the knowledge and skills to make a living whilst at the same time maintain in their students a sense of criticality and autonomy? How should courses in more rural locations retain graduates and begin to build local art ecologies and audiences? How should courses best prepare students for entry into an unpredictable economy, jobs market and evolving arts ecology?

When it came to beginning work on Q-Art's latest publication *Professional Practice: 20 Questions*, in which we spoke to over 50 undergraduate fine art staff from across the UK, we were keen to explore these questions further. Building on *The lay of the land*, we wanted to know what impact if any the now established tuition fee rise had had and what strategies courses in various parts of the UK had developed to prepare their students for life after the course.

Our central questions in the publication were: When it comes to an undergraduate fine art education, what is professional practice? How are students prepared for life after their course and what are they being prepared for? How might attitudes and approaches be shaped by factors such as location, the wider course philosophy, and the cultural and political climate?

These seemed important questions to ask, not only because of the current economic climate of rising tuitions fees and a reduction in maintenance grants –

and what this might mean for those who are thinking about studying art at undergraduate level – but also because the concept of ‘professional practice’ in a fine art context seems to stir up controversy. On the one hand there is the practical consideration that most of those who embark on a fine art course will need to make some sort of living once they graduate, not least to pay off a substantial student loan. On the other hand, there is the complex question about whether a fine art education has a responsibility to prepare students to earn a living after the course, and if it does, what form might this preparation take and what is it preparing them for. Dean Hughes at Edinburgh College of Art, highlights some of the complexity:

“I think one of the things about professionalism, and really it is a thorny and difficult issue, is perhaps that what one might teach would always be quite old fashioned. Students learn as much, if not more, from each other than they do from faculty, and what needs teaching really is the appetite and ability to destroy what has been taught, to replace the received knowledge with a new meaning. When it comes to thinking about professional destinations, quite often we prepare students in our mould and it might not be a good fit at the time, and it is an even worse fit when they look at it 20 years later. One of the pertinent questions for education is how do we, as teachers, not place ourselves as unnecessary barriers to others’ experiences?”

In order to establish a wider context, we also asked staff about the history, philosophy, and structure of their course; about the effect of the location of their course and its demographic; about their own recollections of how they were prepared for life beyond art school; and about their own views on the language of employability, professional practice and what defines a successful graduate. The responses we received were rich, various, nuanced and heavily shaped by context.

What is professional practice and how is it 'taught'?

Across many disciplines, the preparation for working life after graduation is often labelled as 'professional practice', hence its use in the title of Q-Art's latest book. However, with no clear-cut route that an art graduate might take, the term itself, although recognised in the field of visual art education, is subject to much contestation.

The interviews revealed, as did the 2013 report, that targeted approaches to preparing students for life after art school varied considerably from institution to institution and were very much bound up with the wider philosophy and approach of any one BA course.

Whilst some courses offered designated professional development modules or sessions as an assessed part of the curriculum, others kept their named provision strictly extra-curricular. However, both groups argued that professional practice is something that was developed throughout all three or four years of a BA – be it through embedded exhibition or project opportunities; via the core fine art pedagogy of crits, seminars and tutorials; or during the everyday activity of working in the studio.

"We're keen for students to gain experience of professional practice from the moment they arrive but I think we need to take care with our definition of 'professional practice'. Painting in the studio can constitute training in professional practice."

Brendan Fletcher, Programme Leader, BA Visual Art, University of Salford.

"I think the notion of employability, or what happens after art school, is involved in all of the teaching, from putting on a show and thinking about how you communicate an idea to your audience, to your relationship to the outside world. It's also in things like learning how to use a spot welder. If you know how to weld that's a very useful tool to equip yourself with, and a very good transferable skill."

Dr Catrin Webster, Programme Director, BA Fine Art, Swansea College of Art.

1. Distinct professional development sessions

Distinct professional development sessions included: preparing CVs, writing funding and residency applications, mock-gallery interviews, pricing work, visiting artist or graduate talks, one-to-one coaching, and sessions on how to set up as self-employed. These sessions took place variously as part of the course or as extra-curricular activity delivered both by the course team and external careers services. There were also examples of assessed course modules that encouraged students to take up placements or work experience in an area of their choosing, with many staff who

offered such experiences emphasising the importance of grounding professional development opportunities in a context that is meaningful to the student.

One such example is *LifeWorkArt*, a professional practice programme led by David Butler at Newcastle University that runs across all four years of the BA course. *LifeWorkArt* supports students to develop a range of projects outside of the university, including public art; placements with artists and arts organisations; educational, community and participatory projects; art therapy; event and festival organisation; and publishing. Projects and placements are instigated and led by the students in accordance with their interests, and business and planning skills are developed throughout the programme as they are needed. Here, Butler emphasises the importance of 'situated learning':

"A key part is not teaching business or planning skills up front. The approach is to take a project and ask: what needs to be done to make this happen, so skills are acquired as they are needed and when they are seen as useful... So students set up projects – exhibitions, screenings, community projects, whatever – and develop professional aptitudes in doing that. The important thing is that the learning of those 'professional' aptitudes is powered by the work. In pedagogic terms this would be 'situated learning'. Its value is that it is quicker and it sticks. But note: like everything else a student does it demands critical reflection."

Another example of providing students with meaningful placements is the BA Fine Art Diploma in Professional Studies (DPS) year at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London. The Diploma is an optional sandwich year that students can take between years two and three of their degree (from June to the following October). In this time they research and undertake a minimum of 100 days of self-directed placements and projects that inform their personal, professional and artistic development. Diploma Leader, Soraya Rodriguez explains:

"I always tell them they've got three boxes, any one of which a placement can tick. One is their personal development, where they learn self-management and time management through working as part of a team or on self-directed projects... then, there's professional development, which is more technical skills, understanding of context, being able to identify the best organisation within a peer group... then there is the artistic development... The full length and breadth of student subject interests is very wide, as you can imagine. Some of them will go into theatre because they're interested in performance, or aspects of performance. One spent a whole year in a design agency specifically focused on animations so that she could learn the craft. Within an individual's DPS year, they will also do a variety of things.... One of them this year is

volunteering at various mental health institutions. That's because her work is around mental health issues and the perception of mental health."

2. Embedded approaches

Exhibition, project, and placement opportunities were often embedded within the wider structure of the course and were not identified specifically to the students as 'professional practice'. Here Dr Marianne Greated, Year Tutor BA Fine Art Painting and Printmaking at The Glasgow School of Art tells us how exhibition opportunities are embedded throughout the course:

"In the first couple of weeks of first year there is a small show where [students] share work with other students. I know it sounds minor, but it sets a precedent where quite easily they can transform an environment or their work, view it and have feedback. It also encourages professionalism and develops a wide range of skills at an early developmental stage. In second year there is a slightly more professional exhibition held annually within one of the galleries in the art school. Then in third year they have a more ambitious exhibition which prepares them for their fourth year experience where the degree show is public facing and presents the outcomes of their final year. We are gradually building and progressing the types of opportunities that students have to develop and show their work, and also that exposure to external audiences or professionals. It then doesn't become a massive leap for students to show a piece of work in a gallery or create their own opportunities."

Alistair Payne, Head of the School of Fine Art at The Glasgow School of Art, describes how the opportunity to develop professional attributes and transferable skills are embedded throughout the entire course, including its core pedagogy of crits, seminars and tutorials:

"OK, let's take a look at the structure of the crit. You have to be able to speak, explain ideas, and negotiate with other people over the possibility of those ideas. That is a taught transferable skill. Then putting on a show externally, curating with other artists, understanding the quite complex concepts and structures of putting a show together, that is also a transferable skill. You could pick lots of them. They are embedded within the structure of the curriculum."

What types of futures are students being prepared for?

As well as asking staff about how they were preparing students for life after art school, we also asked them what sort of futures they believed they were preparing students for. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of those we interviewed told us that their courses were equipping students to continue working as artists. However, they offered a range of interpretations of what it is to be 'an artist' and in accordance with this, different ways of preparing students.

Interpretations ranged from the idea of a practising artist as someone who is making work in dialogue with the contemporary art world, to a more holistic view of what an art practice is – where being an artist is also seen as possessing a set of characteristics that graduates will take with them into all walks of life, and where practice might be something they return to as and when they can. Indeed, the model that many people will recognise – of being signed up to a gallery and making a living from continually producing work – appears to be losing its dominance as the sole marker of 'success'. This has perhaps been brought about by the tough economic climate and difficulties of maintaining a studio, the ever-growing number of fine art graduates, a recognition that very few people ever attain this lifestyle, and changing values and aspirations about what constitutes success. In addition, there is also growing recognition and support for the various other directions that a fine art graduate might take once they leave art school – anything from teaching and art therapy to catering and nursing.

Across all courses there was advocacy of the types of attributes that students can gain from an art degree, such as critical and lateral thinking, self-awareness, and the ability to experiment and take risks. All courses shared a common aim to produce graduates who are active in shaping their own future, which is invaluable in an increasingly uncertain world.

How might location impact on how students are prepared for life after art school?

Location was a significant contextual factor in the interviews. Following on from the 2013 study, we were fascinated by the question of how a course in a rural or even an island location fared when preparing students, and we wondered what the challenges and opportunities were in these locations. For instance, one might assume that when preparing students to go on working as contemporary artists, the courses in major art centres such as London are at a distinct advantage. But living and maintaining a studio in the city are increasingly difficult due to high costs. This is in contrast to other parts of

the UK where low rents and support for artists from councils and funding bodies make it easier for graduates to stay on in the place in which they studied.

Throughout the book there are examples of courses offering placements within nearby art spaces, forming strong partnerships with local councils, and taking a strong and active role in developing new art scenes and audiences.

Plymouth College of Art is one such example. Dr Stephen Felmingham, programme leader of BA Painting, Drawing and Printmaking, describes the art college as a 'change maker in its own city'. Speaking about the wider activities of the art school he told us about *Plymouth School of Creative Arts*, a 4-16 mainstream, city centre free school with arts at the centre of the curriculum, that the college set up and sponsors. Speaking about his own course, which is just three years old, he tells us about various placement opportunities that the course offers within the city; about a Student Conference run by second year students and attended by first and third year students and other artists from across the region; and about how he hopes that graduates of the course will be active agents in building the city's art scene:

*"You could probably count the critical galleries in Plymouth on the fingers of one hand... More are starting to emerge, and I think they're going to come from the agency of the art school as a change-maker in its own city. The city feels very vibrant now. The students that come here realise that it's all to play for in Plymouth and they are now going to stay. They become the audience that then feeds back into the system, and everything starts to almost kind of bootstrap itself up... Third year students are already starting to have shows in local galleries and be very successful in selling work; they're taking on studios in *Ocean Studios*, which is a new studio complex in Royal William Yard. They're already there, they're moving quite fast. The way the programme works is by making everything happen much earlier."*

How have things changed since the staff were at art school and what might the future look like?

What was clear in all of the interviews is how different things are now from when many of the staff we interviewed studied at art school. For one, there were grants and no tuition fees, and so the pressure to think about how they might earn a living after the course was much less – and the emphasis on education for its own sake was much greater. In contrast, students now are entering higher education amidst a culture of high tuition fees, reduced maintenance grants, and large student debt – a culture, which as Dean Kenning, Research Fellow in the School of Fine Art at Kingston University, says, has changed the psychology of students who now need to think early on about

future employment. Many of the staff that we spoke to are working hard to achieve a culture and curriculum that balances these imperatives.

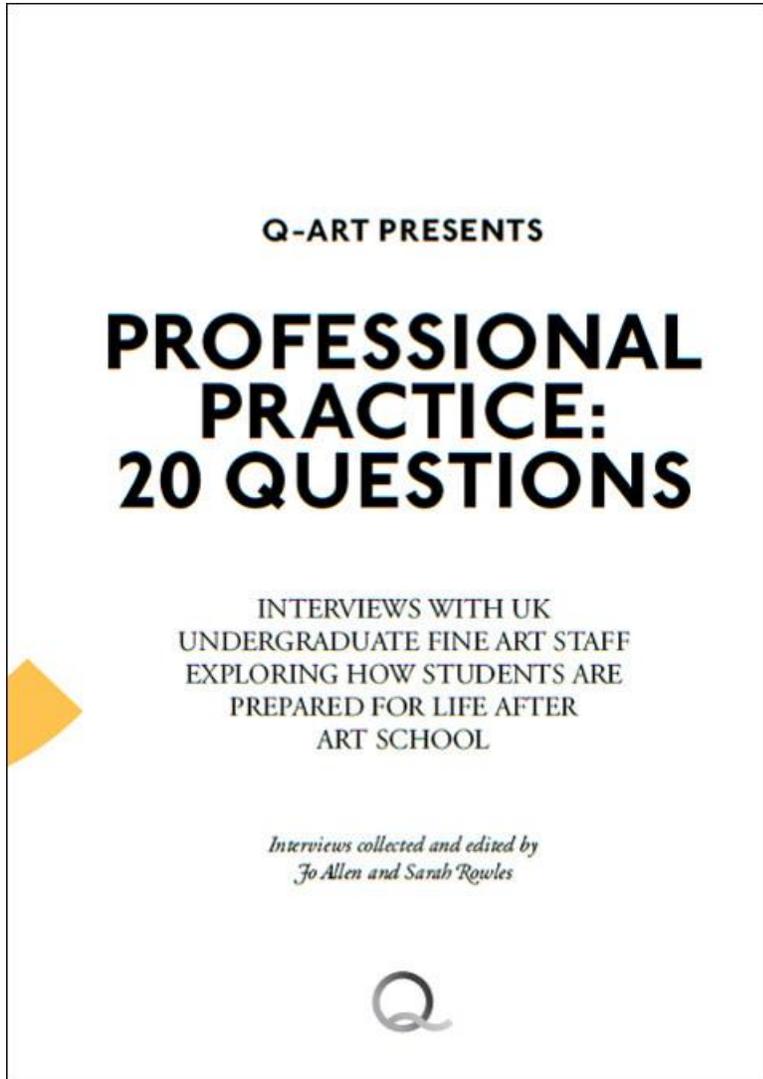
On the one hand, it can be argued that studying for a fine art degree is precarious, because as Michael Archer, Professor of Art at Goldsmiths says "there are no city internships for artists' and graduates will 'have to make their own way". On the other, and for this very same reason, a fine art degree offers a unique space, time and opportunity for a student to discover more about themselves and their interests and how they might use these and the skills they have developed, to shape their own future in a changing world.

The book is clear in demonstrating the breadth of careers that fine art graduates go into. It is our view that this breadth should continue to be celebrated and encouraged.

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Featured interviews include staff from: **Arts University Bournemouth**; University of Brighton; **Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London**; Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London; **University of the Creative Arts Farnham**; Edinburgh College of Art; **The Falmouth School of Art, Falmouth University**; The Glasgow School of Art; **Goldsmiths College, University of London**; Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University; **Isle of Man College**; Kingston University; **Lews Castle College, University of the Highlands and Islands**; Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University; **Newcastle University**; Open College of the Arts; **Plymouth College of Art**; University of Salford; **Southampton Solent University**; Swansea College of Art, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; **University of the West England**; The University of Wolverhampton; **School of Creative Arts**; Wrexham Glyndwr University.



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