

I was doing a final edit on a research report recently, and in the process of hunting out a reference I came across an astonishing statistic in one of the Design Council's useful little reference guides *Design in Britain 1998-99: Facts figures and quotable quotes*<sup>1</sup>. The statistic that struck me concerns the number of students studying design at university in the UK. There are apparently 62,000 students on 900 design courses spanning 120 different specialisms in 190 British universities and colleges.<sup>2</sup> Gosh!

There are several levels to my interest in these figures but the one that concerns me immediately is what happens to these students when they graduate. This question has for years been surrounded by lots of anecdotal evidence, misinformation and prejudice – and there has been a remarkable lack of good, hard research evidence. Accordingly, I was delighted to hear about such a research venture, and to receive an Executive Summary of the research report *Destinations and Reflections: Careers of British Art, Craft and Design Graduates*.<sup>3</sup>

I knew of this research from a previous contact with the research team some 12 months previously, and I knew it was undertaken on behalf of a partnership of 14 art and design higher education institutions, led and co-ordinated by the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design and the Surrey Institute of Art and Design. In each of these 14 institutions, questionnaires were sent to all the design students who had graduated within a five year period (1994-98), inviting them to fill them in with sufficient detail to record a personal career path over the early years after graduating. It was made clear that this career path could legitimately embrace paid and unpaid employment as well as self-employment, and it could include work outside as well as within the design world. The aim was simply to find out as much as possible about what happened to these design graduates in the first few years after leaving college.

My curiosity about this research was sharpened when I read (in the Executive Summary) that with a research sample of 2000 graduates, the following statistics emerged:

- only 20% of art and design graduates are involved in work that is not relevant to art and design
- only 4.9% of art and design graduates are currently unemployed and seeking work

Given the huge size of the art and design student population in higher education, we

can assume that something like 10-15,000 of them graduate each year. And the statistics from this study would have us believe that not only do virtually all of them gain employment, but also that 80% of them gain art and design related employment!

However, these statistics appear to contradict the findings of a MORI survey<sup>4</sup> commissioned by the Design Council to examine a number of issues surrounding the courses and career aspirations of design undergraduates. This survey reports that only about 20% of design graduates get jobs in design.

Our findings show that students are optimistic about obtaining a career in design, but not realistic ... 78% of students who want to work in a design related career say that it is likely that they will do so after completing their education. (MORI 1998 p. 12)

By the end of their course, many of these students are becoming somewhat more realistic as the reality of the career opportunities becomes more apparent to them.

There is a notable variation in views on employment opportunities in design by year of study. Final year students are more realistic; approaching half agree that there are few design-related jobs, compared to a third of the first year students. (MORI 1998 p. 13)

So what are we to make of the apparently contradictory findings from these two recent surveys? Is it yet another example of lies; damn lies and statistics?

There are two things about the 'destinations and reflections' survey that give me pause for thought. The first is the sample of 2000 students that it draws from, for I understand that this represents a very low response rate from those who were originally sent the questionnaire (figures varying from 8% to 25% have been suggested).<sup>5</sup> This is more than a bit worrying, for what this really means is that their 20% figure of graduates not employed in design-related areas is actually 20% of the ?% that returned their questionnaires. This is a very different thing. Who is more likely to return such a questionnaire? A graduate who is 'successfully' employed as a designer – or a graduate who is unemployed, or who has lost contact with the world of design? Such a low response rate raises serious questions about the usefulness of the data. And my second worry about this report is its defensive *tone*. The implicit message that it appears to be trying to communicate is that design degree

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courses are doing just fine – leave us alone – our folk are getting just as many jobs as anyone else – we don't need to change.

It strikes me that this piece of research is monumentally missing the point of higher education. It assumes that a job in design is somehow the 'right' job – the only proper job – for a design graduate. Thank goodness all philosophy students – or archaeology students – don't have the same vocational blinkers. We would be knee deep in Zen, and falling head first into countless holes in the ground (actually, now I come to think about it, the Old Kent Road just might be their practice site...)

The reality of higher education in design is that it has a quite distorted vocational focus. In a study that we are just completing with design undergraduates<sup>6</sup>, it was startling to find that within our sample, **all** the courses are conceived as serving vocational purposes. Tutors are training their students to be designers in various disciplines and fields, and – in consequence – the students have picked up the very clear message that they are training to be either specialist or generalist designers working somewhere in the design industry. They are not pursuing a higher education degree in the classical sense; they are training for a specific profession, and in the main they have an occupational route planned. Students commented to us that...

'For me it doesn't have to be product design. I wouldn't mind seeing how interiors worked and maybe even furniture.'

'What I would ultimately like to do is work with a number of employers like a freelance design consultant.'

'We all plan to go into design.'

This is a very sad testament to a seriously limited vision of design in higher education. It arises from the vocational traditions from which design courses stem and through which design tutors have been enculturated. And research studies such as 'destinations and reflections' seek to legitimise this limited vocational agenda by arguing (with dubious statistics) that all the graduates will get jobs in design when they leave college.

Not only do I find it difficult to believe these statistics (I think MORI is closer to the mark) but anyway it should be irrelevant to the core argument about design in higher education. Some design graduates *may* become practitioners of design, and some may become scholars of design. But far more will probably not be either. They will simply be graduates of design who take the talents they have

developed *through* design into myriad fields of employment ... just as will the philosophy and archaeology graduates. And quite right too. It is not a failure when a design graduate gets a job as a restaurant manager. It is an opportunity for that graduate to exercise all their creative skills to generate the very best restaurant in town (Conran isn't doing badly, after all).

I think it is great that 62,000 students are studying design at university – not because we need 62,000 designers, but because the quite unique kinds of enlightenment, vision and capability that are fostered in such courses are so valuable in so many walks of life. The real measure of the success of a design course should not be based on how many graduates subsequently become designers – but rather it should be evident in the diversity of employment that it enables graduates to pursue.

#### References

- 1 Design Council 1998.
- 2 The source of figures quoted in the Design Council booklet is FCO/DTI *Innovative Britain at Expo 98*.
- 3 Centre for Research into Quality. UCE Birmingham.
- 4 *Survey of Design Undergraduates: A research study conducted for the Design Council*. MORI 1998.
- 5 Neither the general methodology of the survey, nor the details of statistical sampling are presented in the Executive Summary report.
- 6 *Design Skills for Work*, a project in TERU at Goldsmiths College sponsored by the Design Council and based on interviews conducted in a range of design courses in 10 colleges.