

Education for masses and masses...

Adrian Stokes gives his view on the state of design education where he feels there are too many courses attempting to provide degree level education with too few resources and too many students

At school I remember art college as a place where the slightly exotic ended up. My vague feeling was that it was on a par with university, furnishing the world with “commercial artists” amongst others. Not a likely spot for me to continue my education but one which, as luck would have it, I blundered into, mainly because my girlfriend was at university near one.

I found the reality had been a well kept secret at my school. Imagine if you can a world where ten students have unlimited access to huge, excessively equipped workshops with willing technicians, unlimited free materials, a staff student ratio of 2.5:1, free industrial visits, visiting tutors and a curriculum that boasted everything from life drawing and calligraphy to humanities and mechanics (well, there had to be bad news) and at the end of it an examination without exams. This was as good as higher education got and even then we spent a lot of time complaining about it.

What I have witnessed in the 28 years since I got my first job is sad and alarming, with once internationally respected, centres of creative excellence being insidiously reduced to bolstering numbers, recruiting students with neither talent nor vocation, whose presence exhausts the time and energy of demoralised staff. Education has been replaced by training in order, once again, to service volume.

At ground zero this has led to the wholesale adoption of education by modules, helpful to average students but soul destroying to the gems the system used to nurture and allow space to develop. What’s interesting to me as a consumer is the product not the working rig. I do know that for many students it takes two and a half years of search and research to release the creative certainty that results in frighteningly good work.

I lament the passing of the art college and its imperfect but effective system of vocational education. In many ways it reflected the very unpredictable nature of creativity with the belief that if you fed enough information, influences and experiences into a receptive mind then surprisingly new and interesting thoughts would emerge...given time.

Systems have to change. Technology and the expansion of higher

education has seen to that but, instead of adapting and refining, (as the whole design profession has had to do in this breakneck world) there is wholesale change passed down the chain of command to bewildered and resentful foot soldiers who are barely consulted. Students are spending increasing amounts of time huddled in front of computers in tiny bedsits instead of interacting in a lively studio environment and as a consequence the very point of going to university, to experience diversity and interact with other bright like minds has been lost.

Today, the loss of special status that the art and design colleges once enjoyed and the dispersion of the knowledge base that they created, has been replaced by a creeping anarchy with professional administrators and “researchers” (another subject) experimenting with the lives and money of their charges and the charges themselves taking advantage of an undemanding and lax system. Before I precipitate a hail of abuse, there are

some survivors (you know who you are) but they are under scrutiny and subject to the same pressures. It just happens that they still have course leaders with enough unity of purpose to resist... for now.

Recently I had received applications from two first class graduates from different 3D courses at the same institution. They could have been educated on different planets, the standards were so different. In my opinion one of the students had cause to sue the university in question. I felt so sorry and angry on his behalf, but also at him, for not having the gumption to do something about the problems he had experienced. There’s little wonder that there is such a decline in the quality and morale of graduates and the standards they have to attain to get a good degree.

That’s all, I need to have a lie down, it always affects me like this “it’s all a bloody shame”. ■

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What is your viewpoint? If you wish to respond to Adrian’s opinions please email them to tanya@newdesignmagazine.co.uk