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# **Students' practice and identity work at UAL: Year 2 student experiences**

Year 2 report of a 4-year longitudinal study  
for the University of the Arts London

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## Summary

This report is based on the second year's data from a four-year longitudinal research study which explores the higher education experiences of undergraduate students at UAL from different ethnic backgrounds; and the interplay between these experiences and their intersected identities. The study aims to illuminate statistical patterns in students' attainment, specifically, that Black and minority ethnic students are around 19% less likely than White students to gain first or upper second degrees. This research study is based on the premise that creative arts students' multi-faceted identities are intrinsic to their practice, and so seeks to understand the interplay between students' identities and experience at UAL in the expectation that such an understanding will bring about changes in taken-for-granted practices that underlie the gap in attainment.

Year 2 findings are based on a sample of 45 undergraduate students, interviewed twice, drawn from all four UAL colleges and from graphic design, fashion and text-based subjects.

When students are developing creatively and intellectually they sustain a sense of belonging, both to the practices within their subject area and in relation to people around them. Being absorbed in practice is sustained or hampered by the conditions within which students operate: the presence and absence of familial support; close and distant relationships with tutors and peers; financial hardship and ease; the problems and opportunities of paid work; short-term crises and more chronic circumstances that are 'ongoing battles'.

The quality of working relationships with tutors was of paramount importance and influenced the degree to which students could benefit from feedback. Students who most consistently benefited from feedback were most often White, home students but there were also a small number of Home Asian and a very few international students who did so. The advantages of such relationships were manifold: such students were understood by tutors, and advised by them in a way that was consonant with their aspirations. Particular tutor practices structure students' orientations toward feedback. There were some practices among tutors which seemed to result in feelings of being misunderstood and demoralisation: favouritism, arbitrary or authoritarian feedback, brevity and impersonal contexts for feedback, and unfair expectations given the students' resources.

Preliminary thinking about their future possible selves was very much in evidence among the students but they varied along a number of dimensions: the degree of certainty about their aspirations, the extent to which they had taken practical steps toward their ultimate goals, the extent to which their options were limited or expanded by material resources at their disposal, familial support, course context and their beliefs about how their future self may come about.

This report is a resource for raising awareness among tutors of unfamiliar perspectives among students, of unintended consequences of teaching and assessment practices, and of the effects of certain ways of organising and resourcing learning and teaching. Tutors and course teams may wish to reflect on the ways in which they relate to students who share, or do not share, their own cultural references. It is hoped that those tutors who are already curious about the experiences and perspectives of their students will find avenues of enquiry within the findings that they might pursue with their own students. For example, they might reflect on the characteristics of 'the intellectual project that is the course', the extent to which it reflects the identities of the course team members, and the extent of its relevance to students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## Introduction

This report should be read alongside the year 1 report, *Becoming Students at UAL*, which situates the project in the current literature on differentials in student attainment and relates research evidence to current discussions within UAL on the causes of differential attainment. In summary it concludes that student attributes such as socio-economic status, prior qualifications and language do not explain the different attainment levels between White and Black and Minority Ethnic students. In the introduction to this year 2 report, I update this information drawing on some more recently produced national research and the figures produced by UAL's Planning Unit.

At a national level HEFCE analysis controls for prior qualifications and finds that Black and minority ethnic students are less likely to gain a first or upper-second degree. For example, 72 per cent of White students who entered higher education with BBB gained a first or upper second. This compares with 56 per cent for Asian students, and 53 per cent for Black students, entering with the same A-level grades. (HEFCE 2014/03).

At UAL in 2013/14 (UCPU 2015) the proportion of Home White students attaining a first or upper second degree was 19% higher than for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students. The proportion of International students who attain a first or upper second degree is 21% lower than for Home students and 25% lower than for EU students. The proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students who progress from year 1 to year 2 is also 10% lower than for White students. These inequalities in students' outcomes are present across the HE sector and addressing them is therefore central to many institutions' priorities.

It is worth noting, that at national level policy is being framed in terms of students' outcomes across the life-cycle, not just with respect to attainment and retention. This is helpful in that it helps us understand students' progress over time, and its variation within different ethnic groups. The table below indicates that Chinese and Indian students exceed the persistence of White students in gaining a degree and whilst they have less likelihood of attaining a first or upper-second, they are more likely to obtain graduate employment or further study. This pattern is an important qualification to the common generalisations about 'BME students'.

Total cohort and percentage of the (2006-7) cohort who achieved each outcome, by ethnicity.

	White	Black	Chinese	Indian	Other Asian	Other / unknown
Starting cohort	181,510	8,465	2,410	10,325	10,835	12,215
<b>Degree-qualified</b>	<b>83.1%</b>	<b>73.8%</b>	<b>87.2%</b>	<b>84.1%</b>	<b>77.7%</b>	<b>78.4%</b>
<b>First or upper second</b>	<b>56.1%</b>	<b>31.3%</b>	<b>50.7%</b>	<b>45.8%</b>	<b>35.9%</b>	<b>49.2%</b>
<b>Degree &amp; employed or studying</b>	<b>72.8%</b>	<b>60.5%</b>	<b>68.6%</b>	<b>70.3%</b>	<b>62.3%</b>	<b>65.7%</b>
<b>Degree &amp; graduate job or study</b>	<b>48.4%</b>	<b>37.7%</b>	<b>53.2%</b>	<b>51.1%</b>	<b>42.6%</b>	<b>46.2%</b>

## Research design and methodology

The year 1 report sets out the research design and methodology in some detail. Here I provide a summary and details of the sample that are specific to the year 2 fieldwork.

This research deploys qualitative methods of interviewing and observation to illuminate historically persistent statistical patterns of inequality in attainment. Alongside longitudinal qualitative fieldwork, statistical analysis of the UAL population of undergraduate students over five years is being explored in the light of emerging insights from the qualitative data. The aim, ultimately, is to establish a relationship between the qualitative and quantitative data sets.

Students have been interviewed twice in the first year, and twice in their second. The first interview of the second year took place between December 2013 and January 2014 and elicited accounts of the previous Summer and Autumn term focusing on points of engagement in the course and in their practice more broadly, low-points or disengagement, identification with tutors and relationships with peers and networks beyond the course. The second interview took place between June and September 2014 and reflected on year 2 as a whole. In this interview the students also brought a piece of work upon which they had received tutor feedback. We discussed how the work was conceived and made, its reception by tutors and others, and their reflections upon that reception.

### Changes in the sample of students

In year 1 there were 53 students in the sample. Twelve of these did not go on to participate in year two: 7 left the university, 1 transferred to another course within UAL, 1 took a year out, and 3 did not respond to invitations to be interviewed for year 2. Four new students were recruited in courses where the sample of students was low. Therefore a total of 45 students participated in year 2, 8 fewer students than in year 1.

The largest group of students, at 22, came from graphic design, 14 from fashion, and 9 from the text-based subjects. There are between 3 and 6 students from each course. The largest ethnic group is of 20 White students; 8 are Chinese (including Singapore, Hong Kong); 4 are Black (African and Caribbean); 3 are Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi); and a further 10 are from other Asian, and other ethnicities (a wide-ranging group that includes Middle Eastern, Central and South American, Japanese, Thai, amongst others). There are 28 UK home students, 12 international students and 5 EU students. Their ages ranged from 18 to 36. A total of 8 students were lesbian, gay or bi-sexual. First generation entrants to higher education numbered 15 and the remaining 30 students had at least one parent with experience of higher education either within the UK or elsewhere. No students had mobility disabilities, one had a sensory disability, six were having dyslexia support and two were receiving treatment to support their mental health.

### Analytic concepts

The central organising concept that is used in analysing the findings is that of identity. Rather than conceiving of it as an essential personal set of qualities or characteristics, identity is defined in this project as socially and historically constructed in an interplay between what students bring and the environments within which they operate. In Hall's terms, the subject is both 'hailed' and invests in a position through 'articulation' (Hall 1997: 6). Furthermore, within this project identity is analysed in relation to a particular domain of social life: becoming and

being an art and design student at UAL, though student's pasts and futures are implicated in their present experiences. Again, drawing on Hall, 'because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites...' (Hall 1997: 4).

May's (2011) work on belonging as a means of understanding the relationship between social change and the self is consonant with Hall's characterisation of identities. She defines belonging as 'as a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings' and explores how inclusion and exclusion from the mechanisms of social change have an impact on the self. Belonging or not belonging do not have ideal or purely negative consequences, but it is important to examine who belongs and who does not belong in the interests of understanding social change (2011:375). This is the background to the section on *Relationships with tutors and 'signing up to the intellectual project that is the course'*.

In addition, I use the work of Caplan and Ford (2014:34-35) who, drawing on the work of others, utilise the term 'micro-aggressions' which they define as 'manifestations of prejudice and hatred that are brief and/or subtle but great in the power or magnitude of their consequences.' They distinguish between microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation: microassaults are explicit, conscious racial derogations in the form of verbal or nonverbal attacks that are meant to hurt the intended victim; micro-insults are communications that often unconsciously convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's race/ethnicity/: many instances of favouritism fall into this category of micro-aggression. Micro-invalidations are 'communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour,' examples of this are most clearly visible in the findings below on the ways in which students form (or do not form) relationships with tutors and see themselves reflected in the curriculum. These instances are not always clearly perceived by students themselves, but are more often justified and even defended by them.

In the final findings section which analyses how students' conceptualise their futures, I have used the work of Stevenson and Clegg (2011) on 'possible selves', a psycho-social concept that links motivation, self-concept and social context that has gained currency in North America.

Finally, it is worth noting that the purpose of the analysis as a whole is to illuminate the causes of differential attainment among students of different ethnicities. Clearly, an account that relates to final attainment results will have to wait until the student cohort graduates: some in 2015 and others (who have been on placements or DPS) in 2016. The analyses of first and second year findings cumulatively build towards this purpose of causal explanation: an illumination of mechanisms that might underlie statistical correlations.

## Findings

Three over-arching themes are derived from subjecting the interview data to the analytic concepts described above in the methodology. The first is about the ways in which students *develop creative and intellectual interests*. An integral part of the dynamics of identity work, these developments are seen as emanating from an interplay between students' agentic orientations and social structures around them. *Being understood, making sense of feedback and assessment*, the second theme, explores the particular interplay between students and academics that takes place in relation to evaluative judgements about work. *Possible selves*, the third theme, analyses the extent to which students construct their present experiences as preparation for their future lives, and how their choices and social positioning aid or close down possibilities.

Note: In this report quotes are attributed to an interview number followed by demographic information. Students' anonymity is regarded as paramount to ensuring that there is no possible effect on their relationships with staff. Where identification is deemed possible, incidental details have been altered or demographic information omitted.

Each quote is attributed as in the examples below:

[S01-2a – F Wh-H] signifies: Student 01, year 2, first interview, female White Home student

[S06 – 2b- M – Ch- Int] signifies Student 06, year 2, second interview, male, Chinese International student.

## DEVELOPING CREATIVE AND INTELLECTUAL INTERESTS

This section explores how students develop their creative and intellectual interests within graphic design, fashion or text-based subjects, and how these interests relate to their identities. In other words, it analyses their sense of belonging, both to the practices within their subject area and in relation to people around them within and outside the course among whom they develop a sense of belonging, or not belonging. The section begins by describing the characteristics of 'being absorbed': the intentions, habits and endeavours that students described as they talked about their work, particularly what they considered to be recent 'highlights'.

Having identified what it means to be absorbed and developing practice, we move to the conditions within which students operate, as emerging designers and practitioners, which affirm or undermine them: family, tutors, peers and other networks. We examine how these factors can work to fuel the development of some students, and obstruct the development of others. We touch on the ramifications of: the presence and absence of familial support; close and distant relationships with tutors and peers; financial hardship and ease; the problems and opportunities of paid work; short-term crises and more chronic circumstances that are 'ongoing battles'. The ways in which students' interests develop during year 2 often inform their aspirations regarding their work for year 3 – whether that is their final year or a DPS placement year.

### Being absorbed

When students were immersed in their work, their stories about how ideas had emerged and the approaches and techniques they were using were close to the surface of their everyday

conversation. They relished every opportunity to talk about their work, and show examples. There is a fluency in the articulation of their ideas, for example, with designers often reflecting on the relationship between form and function in their work, using wit, playfulness and metaphor to explain their rationale.

Their analysis of what constituted 'good' design or practice entered into their way of thinking in daily life:

It's a nightmare. You're sitting there on the tube going, but that's just awful because you're appealing to completely the wrong [audience] or that's an awful choice of font. I've always been critical of more like the visual element of it, but now I just get really... I just sit there going, 'why would you choose to do that? That doesn't make any sense...' There's a girl who is a couple of tube stops after me in my class and occasionally we get the tube home together and just sit there going, 'but that is just awful. Why do they do'... drives you mad. [S01-2a – F Wh H]

Prolonged periods of sustained solitary work were often an important part of being absorbed in one's work:

I spent two days walking around London with my camera going there has to be something, there has to be something somewhere. [S01 -2b – F Wh H]

There was also among some students a confidence in a process of working that has been gradually honed through that sustained work:

I think my ideas are quite strong at the moment, in the way that, like, throughout the whole step, from the idea to the final outcome, I am very detailed in every stage. And so that makes a good final outcome because everything has to backup what we do for the final outcome. And I think I'm quite thorough in that and that helps a lot. [S03 – 2a-F Ch –H]

Experimentation took place not just with new techniques but also in testing themselves and their own capacities to master new skills – whether using digital tools or traditional craft technologies. Through that process some would become aware of the professional values that are attached to particular techniques and media and begin to situate their own practice within those value systems:

...some people are too extreme, saying new technology is the only way forward and saying print and poster and anything handcrafted is old and you can't use it anymore, because there are a lot of people who actually think like that within graphic design, and I don't agree with that at all. ...it's more you have to pick the things from the old and make it work with the new, rather than saying you're made redundant now. ... doesn't make sense to just throw away something, and I really still like the tactile way of working, the more handcrafted. Maybe some kind of hybrid pathway, I think, in the future, rather than just one thing. You see that part of [this piece of work] as more than just the workings for the digital, but rather as a thing in its own right that can be used in a hybrid way. [S02 – 2a-M- Asian H]

So probably in every design category, there's a very strong idea in the industry about what good design is. So it's like certain designers, like Alexander Wang or [unclear] or even [unclear] that's considered good design and then there's [unclear] considered probably tacky, like Roberto Cavalli or Versace. And then I like to have things meet in the middle. And I really enjoy that kind of exploring of both sides because lots of times I see people just doing one side. Usually people go really... they do trashy, really whacky or like really minimal and black and white and grey. [S11-2a-M Wh EU]

There was always a social aspect to this experimentation. Building relationships and gaining good will of technicians or seeking opportunities to stretch oneself through competitions or extra-curricular live projects.

Experimentation was often accompanied by openness to testing out ideas on others, and often actively seeking opportunities to do so. Some students, although not yet engaging in this openness were aware of a need to do so:

But that's something I've been thinking about ...that I should show, and link it to my Facebook and stuff, because I am not really comfortable with showing to everyone what I'm doing. But I know that I need to get better at that. [S04-2a-F-Wh EU]

Working with like-minded peers, not just in course-based group-work, but in practice that is external to the course was also characteristic of students who seemed fully-absorbed in their work.

It's just a personal project that we... because we've had quite a lot of inductions this term, we thought... because we are getting briefs and there's no time to do your own thing, we thought we'd do something together to make sure we're using the skills that we're learning. It's quite good. We both push each other. There's a friendly competitiveness, which is always good as well. In that sense I think that's also another part of my practice that is helping as well, having someone who is in the same area as you, someone who you can talk to about your work who will be quite honest, and I think it's very helpful to have that. [S02-2a-M-Asian-H]

There was often a sense of development from year 1 to 2, and across year 2 – evident between the first and second interviews. For example, students could recount how their own evaluative judgements had developed:

...the first time I got into university things in other people's work looked innovative, special, to me... And then, after one year, again, I can see that it's the same as last year. Like for last year's show I used three or four hours [to look at other students' final work] to say ah, that's amazing! And, this year, I only [spend] one hour, I can go, and see, and if it's not good, that's it - I can sense it better. [S12 -2a-F Ch Int]

Yes. So I think I probably might go dabble into [interest from year 1] again still. I think the long and short of it, is I still haven't got my silhouette. I think I know who I am as a designer. I like traditional things. I like a little bit of formality but I like to put a fun element into my designs as well so, yes, I think I like to not laugh at fashion but just have a little bit of playfulness in my design aesthetic but obviously trying to still keep it a bit traditional because otherwise it will turn theatrical kind of thing and I don't want that. [S21-2b-F-Wh H]

In the quote above there is also a sense of unfinished development and a knowledge of future directions to explore and perfect. Other behaviours associated with expert (as opposed to novice) performance became more evident by the time of the second interviews. For example, this student exemplifies the tendency of experts to spend more time conceptualising a novel problem rather than guessing at resolutions prematurely:

The actual doing it like a few days, but like most [work], all the planning is what takes a lot of time really. The [purpose of the technique] is to kind of work out the angle where you want everything, and the composition of how it's going to look, and,... well once you know it all then it's just a matter of doing it. So the planning is the long part ...[S02 – 2a-M Asian H]

Students who were absorbed in their work during year 2 easily traversed their own histories and childhoods in seeking reference points and felt free to do so,

Why did I do [this theme]? ...that kind of thing has always been a passion, an interest of mine, trying to make things, I like to design things for a purpose rather than design things that just look good in a magazine layout or for a corporate company like that. That's why I look at [this

body of work] as an inspiration. I really love ... everything about that. It just always seems to happen that way that, when I do a project, it weaves in, that interest weaves in. [S03 – 2a-F Ch –H]

And later in the year, the same student talks more confidently about bringing her (complex) cultural identity into her work in a way that can be understood by others:

I just wanted to show the two sides of me. ... instead of a product that was gimmicky, might be fun for people to buy, I, again, had the purpose and I wanted to represent myself because I'm putting something out there as a designer and, yes, and to show who I am but also appeal to people, to buyers as well. [S03 – 2b-F Ch –H]

## Familial contexts

In Year 1 one of the main findings was that familial contexts were highly significant in structuring students' entry into the creative arts, and in determining material advantage and disadvantage as students' progress. This finding is also supported by the work of Taylor and Littleton (2008a and 2008b) with respect to postgraduate students in art and design. Here we examine these processes within year 2, asking in particular how familial contexts can fuel students' immersion into their work or hamper it. Of course for some students, particularly mature students, familial contexts seemed neutral or irrelevant, though of course close relationships, friendship groups and other networks became more significant.

Asked whether he talked to his mother about his work one student described the material parameters of such conversations:

Not really because when I speak to my mum we tend to have a lot of arguments, it's me asking her for money and her telling me she hasn't got it. So it never really gets further than that. I've just never...not just because I'm very closed plus I don't really get the time because she's always on the move, working, working. ... so then I was going through a period of time when every time I speak to my mum, I get so angry because it's the same thing. How can I have these arguments with the only person who I've really got? That's very frustrating, as well. [S82-2a-BI-M-H]

Whilst international students were often supported financially by their families (and year 1 report explores the affective dimensions of this), very few felt sustained by the support of their families. Geographic distance alone presents a significant barrier for many kinds of support. For some there was such a gap in assumptions and frameworks of reference that had opened up between themselves and their families, that conversation became too painful:

I try not to update them that much at all. It's just I keep it from them, that's what I've always been doing. They never knew that I'm capable of doing a lot of stuff because I just keep them in the dark. Because I know they know me as that kind of person, but then sometimes Asian family still like to brag so much. I find, I regret telling her that I'm really busy with school for the past few weeks stressing out and anything. So she's been texting me everyday saying have you done your work,.. which adds to the stress so much more. So I just told my Mum you don't need to, can I not talk to you for a week until I'm over with everything. And it's also that since I'm keeping them in the dark once they do know about results and everything they're really curious and they keep asking so many questions... [S83-2b-M-Ch-Int]

In contrast, there were many Home students who seemed very open and at ease in talking about their work with family members, some of whom offered specialist help for example in proof-reading essays:

I like talking to anyone who will sit and listen. Like I was saying last time, it's just a great way of getting feedback from people. The project that we just did... I talked to my Mum about because she's had [relevant experience]. And I'll talk to different people about different

projects. And I talk to my dad if I've got something that I'm really struggling with ideas for because he's really good at coming up with a different way... [S01 -2b – F- Wh- H]

There can also be material benefits to familial support. One student, whose siblings (as well as parents) were also practitioners in art and design benefitted from an introduction to screen printing by working with a sibling which was particularly appreciated as the technicians were perceived as 'somewhat intimidating'. There is reciprocal and ongoing support in such contexts which becomes particularly crucial in times of crisis or doubt.

I'd be showing my portfolio and I'd be talking through the projects, because I was excited about the actual projects that we were doing... So I'd be getting really excited about it and I'd be Skyping them and showing them what I was doing and talking to them and getting their feedback. So, yes, they've been really good. And my [sibling] was actually really helpful when I was doing my dissertation stuff. [S43-2b- F- Wh- H]

In addition to involvement in the students' practice, family members often provide crucial financial assistance:

My mum supports me. But my dad has supported the trip [abroad for an internship] so that's the first time he's actually supported anything in the university but it's nice that he's doing something. And my whole family is supporting me for [the internship abroad] as well. So my grandparents are helping me and stuff like that. It's really nice but it puts me under more pressure to have... to make the most I can out of [it] as well because I feel bad, obviously, spending that much money going somewhere. [S71-2b- F- Wh- H]

Students in this position have choices that are not open to those without such support. For example, students with financial support from their families do not have to undertake paid work that is unrelated to their courses and they do not have the added complexities of managing their finances which the absence of such support brings. Furthermore, they are time-rich. Week-ends and evening can be spent working or relaxing such that they are more productive when they are doing course work. They are also more free to take up unpaid work – small-scale commissions and internships to develop their practice.

## Material resources

Some students who have to undertake unrelated paid work for their living expenses manage to balance their time very well – though it is never easy:

It was really difficult, and I think if I wasn't doing just one day, it would be too much for me this year, because it really has been intense in terms of the work. [working one day a week] it's just enough, I think, but I'm not sure about next year, what will happen, whether I'll live at home or still try and rent a flat because it's quite expensive out there and... I'm trying to save but we'll see, but it's quite hard, ... to manage the finance ... my parents give me a bit of money but it's not enough to support everything otherwise. That's why I'm trying to get my own earnings as well. Sometimes it's a bit stressful ... especially when you're surrounded by a lot of people who can afford to have their parents pay for their uni, and I think at first it was a bit frustrating, but I think now it's just something that you just have to deal with, in a way, and not look at other people, ... you have to just deal with your own situation, what you can do with it. At first it was quite annoying to have to work and everyone's going out and stuff on the weekends, but it's fine now. [S01-2a-M-Asian-H]

What is also apparent from this quote is how visible the material disparities between students are – at least for those students with less material resources. Students with higher levels of financial support from their families often talked about feeling obligated to use the resources that they had well (as in the last quote in the previous section), to give of their best to justify the expense, but they seemed less conscious of the experiences of their peers who did not enjoy similar levels of support.

There were many examples of students' development being interrupted by short term crises ranging from computer problems, burglary and, as in the following case, the breakdown of accommodation arrangements. In addition to the feelings of being unsettled and having to move unexpectedly, the mundane and practical also matter:

I think I tried to [become immersed in my work], but it was hard, because when I was living at my friend's place, I didn't have my own desk. [S04-2a-F-Wh EU]

The impact of these short-term crises varied widely depending on the constants in the students' life. The student above had a friend to whom she could turn and other aspects of her circumstances were characterised by stability. So while there was some disruption to her work, and she found it difficult to immerse herself in that term's assignments, by the end of the year she had recovered and was once again making good progress in her work. In contrast, students whose basic circumstances are already unstable, are dealing with unforeseen events from a baseline of fewer resources:

Yes but it was just mad because when I got my loan I had to give it back so ultimately I've got no money now. Dealing with the fact of my new project and how I think about stuff and what I want to achieve and spending money to do my project but not being able to. [S82-2a-BI-M-H]

By the end of the year, this student had experienced a burglary in which his computer was stolen but had still managed to complete the bulk of his work. The underlying financial problems remained:

...Because I don't know how I'm going to save any money over the summer, I'm still in the same repeat, still in the same cycle that I've always been in. So I'm going home on the 13th to go and work. I don't even know how I got to the end of second year, really. I need to hand in by July, then I'm going back home again to try and work. [S82-2b-BI-M-H]

He was also able to reflect on the interplay between his financial circumstances and his capacity to practice:

...it's always financial. I think I just use that as a massive excuse for me to stop being creative, definitely for me, anyway. Because I know these fabrics, they're not cheap, and I know I've got the ideas, but when I can't even... for the third term, I must have spent about £400 each on printing and stuff like that, it's just so expensive, £1.18 a sheet, and you print out about 50 sheets, it was just mental. So, that's just on paper, so when you're doing... you can imagine what it's like with materials. I think that's the thing, I just need unlimited resources. And that's obviously not realistic, but I wish that I wasn't always giving my money back to people, because then I would be able to manage it properly, I think... I don't have any luxuries anymore... I don't go out; I don't buy anything.

It is arguable that to some extent students have some leeway in the extent to which they spend money on materials. It is possible to find cheaper materials or to choose more expensive ones. However, not all students truly had a choice. Moreover, it was evident that many assignments presumed that students did have substantial financial resources:

Other people in the group did approach about the money issue because we weren't sure whether we were getting funding, because you can't just start up. That's the only thing we really wanted to get help on, even then it wasn't much help because he said, we couldn't get any funding. It was quite annoying because we were thinking what are you paying thousands a year for? [S62-2a-Asian-F-H]

The practical implications of disparities in material resources are further discussed in the section on *Possible selves*.

## Relationships with tutors and ‘signing up to the intellectual project that is the course’

Curricular structures which allowed students to specialise in a ‘pathway’ afforded particular opportunities for students to locate themselves in an area of practice in which they could become absorbed. Sometimes choosing a pathway is straightforward because it taps into longstanding interests that students are keen to pursue:

It’s much more stimulating now because I guess I’m doing what I’m really interested in now.  
[S02 – 2a-M Asian H]

For others it can be an uncertain process where the original choice is often revisited and reviewed. Having a specialisation through a ‘pathway’ did not necessarily narrow down thinking about career options, but rather opened up possibilities by providing an avenue for students to come to a detailed understanding of the structure of the employment market within their particular field. For some students working with tutors with whom they identified or who they felt understood their work and aspirations was of paramount importance.

The year 1 report quoted a tutor observing that ‘some students just don’t sign up to the intellectual project that is the course’ and the findings contained examples of students who found that there was not the curricular space or time to bring themselves (values, cultures, histories) into their work. The extent to which students felt it was possible to draw on their identities, and conversely see themselves reflected in curricula varied across different modules. For example, students from a text-based course were delighted to have touched on the work of Edward Said and Franz Fanon, but lamented how little time had been spent on these authors. One fashion student felt free to draw on her Asian identity within her design practice but found no connection between this and cultural studies:

I think [cultural studies] are really enriching for your mind and everything, but I’m not sure work-wise. I mean, it gives you a better understanding of culture and the world, which is really necessary, but for the actual garments you make, you have to have another knowledge for that. I don't think it has got something to do with my own culture and my own surroundings and stories. ...my work is personal, so I take inspiration that has never anything to do with the things I get from cultural studies. [S14-2a-F-Other Asian-Int]

A further variation on ‘not signing up’ took the form of cynicism about the precept that good design emanates from researched abstract concepts. For example, one fashion student recounted how she ‘needed to find a concept... some concept that [helps me] convince people to buy my clothes’ [S12 -2a-F Ch Int]. This was a student who in previous interviews had agonised over the tension between fashion as art and the imperatives of commercial design.

In contrast, another student ‘signs up’ to the idea that research is integral to good design and crucially positions the tutor as the ultimate arbiter:

It’s a completely new fabrication. I should include that in my research, but my research was too narrow. That’s why sometimes I feel stuck. I think next time, if I feel stuck, I will go research a bit more because by looking at new stuff, you can always add in new things. But I’m still glad the outcome’s great and [the tutor] is satisfied. It’s nice. [S13 -2b-M-Ch-Int]

Nevertheless, by the end of the interview, this student, reflecting on recent interactions with final year students, questions whether the focus of the course on design as opposed to business and social skills is enough to prepare him for a future in fashion.

Favouritism was mentioned by some. The following exchange gives some insight into the dynamics that can be at play. So referring to a particular tutor:

It's like he likes to play favourites a lot, which I don't mind.

*Interviewer: Why don't you mind?*

It's kind of just the way life is, really.

*Interviewer: Are you a favourite?*

No, I wouldn't say... he doesn't hate me. I would say he probably likes me, but I'm definitely not a favourite. I think it's part of the... main thing about the course is that because he only has, I don't know, five people that he nurtures, I would say. And everybody tries to be part of his little elite group and just work really hard. And I think that's kind of the point of the whole thing.

*Interviewer: So is it a shifting group of five or so?*

We haven't had him long enough to really tell. There's always just... I don't know, it's the little things. ...for example, in the end of this year, there's a group project and I think it's about five people in any each group and for each group there's a group leader, which he chooses. It's just an example of the way he just does things. But it's just, I don't know, just the way it is.

*Are there any other ways in which the favouritism is expressed?*

For example, once there was a television team ...and they wanted to film I think four students. And then obviously, the four who got filmed were obviously his favourites and then just [in other instances he might] spend an extra long time with them.

Favouritism was experienced as being expressed in tutors' aesthetic sense. So one student observed that a particular cut that seemed beautiful to some Korean students was deemed the opposite by a tutor who 'focused on their favourites'. So perceptions of favouritism can emanate from feedback that is expressed in an arbitrary or authoritarian manner.

Another student observed that favouritism was partly linked to attendance but also an active attempt by some students to build relationships with tutors that became advantageous:

Yes not to say that they're better than anyone else but they are I suppose given more. I think if you give more love to someone you get more love back. So I can see that kind of thing working. But you don't want to be someone's dog or pet. [S63-2a-Other mixed-M-Home]

The following account from a student who was herself a favourite is also insightful and worth quoting at length:

I'd say that there are favourites. Definitely.

*Interviewer: Are you one of them?*

Yes, I think I am. I probably shouldn't say that, but I think I am, just with little bits. I noticed that for the fittings and that, it was all the favourite students that got picked for the fittings. So, it's quite hard, because obviously I'm friends with other people. They didn't get picked for it, so it's quite...

*Interviewer: Awkward?*

Awkward, but... The thing is, we could have still deserved to get that, it's just that because... I don't know. ... I think it might just be recognition for how hard you work, really, rather than being favouritised. I think they just recognise who works hard and who wants to progress the most, and then they want to help that person more, I think. But, it definitely depends on how much work you bring to class and how much effort you put in, as to how they treat you... I think that's okay, because everyone obviously should be putting in lots of hard work, but, at times it is a bit... hard to generalise. I think it's just how hard you're willing to work outside of Uni as well. And what extra things you're going to do. And then, if you're enthusiastic about a project then they'll pick up on that, and then they'll want to help you more I think...

*Interviewer: Right. Do you think, there are people in the group that do pretty good work, but are not favourites, or haven't had an opportunity to be a favourite, because presumably different tutors have...?*

To be honest, I don't, I think if one person was going to be someone's favourite, then no matter which tutor they went to, it would still be the same because of the work they were producing. *Interviewer: You get rewarded with more attention, which pushes you to achieve even more.* Definitely, yes. I think it's your attitude towards the teachers as well, because some people come in and they're quite, just rude, and a bit lazy sometimes, so obviously they're not going to be...

A number of important insights emerge from this exchange: favouritism (even perceived favouritism) is divisive, it militates against a co-operative and collaborative culture among students; favouritism is signified in the way tutors allocate their time and opportunities for development that it is within their gift to allocate; favouritism is justified along meritocratic lines, it is 'deserved'; 'merit' is demonstrated both within the course and in terms of extra-curricular activity.

Such acts of favouring – which take place over the long-term experience of students - are bound to have sustained and cumulative effects on student's well-being and ultimately their educational outcomes. More sporadic acts of micro-aggression – even though short-lived – can also have profound and lasting consequences.

One student recounted how she was put off interacting with a tutor because of the way he treated students. On one occasion she heard him say to another student, 'I thought you were a lazy Arab, but you've proved me wrong.' On another occasion he told an international student that she should go back to her country given her English wasn't good. For the student who reported these experiences of her peers, this was a part of a pattern of feeling intimidated in this tutor's presence:

... I was too afraid to talk to our tutor because he came across very strong and just scary, and I'm just not used to people like that. I didn't really enjoy talking to him. That's why I just wouldn't go to tutorials as well. But now we have new tutors and I feel a bit more comfortable.

[So] yes, no feedback. I didn't really progress as much as I could have. [S35-2a-Other Asian-F-H] Her attendance was very low for a period of two terms, until the main tutor changed. At times she would turn up to a class and be too afraid to go through the door for fear of the comments that she might attract from him – for example, she was especially nervous if she happened to be late.

Another instance of micro-aggression occurred for a student who was already feeling somewhat demotivated and finding it difficult to identify with tutors and the curriculum. She had just had a supportive meeting with a female tutor and was feeling encouraged about a particular assignment. At the feedback session (with a male tutor):

the tutor told me that I have to stop doing girlish stuff it's not very professional and that I have to develop into a more professional way. Which I absolutely disagree with because this is a university, this is where we study and this is where we develop our own style for graphic design. We are not the same people we can't do the same kind of work. And if my style is girlish then that means that's my style and maybe it doesn't fit for one project but if there is a topic that I needed to do and I did it, it's just about the way it looks, he didn't like the way it looks in general. ...everyone has something in them that they develop. I think it's quite important not to make people the same they are not like robots ...and it wasn't about the mark it was about just the feedback. I think the tutors at [this college] have to pay more attention to students individually. They're not even looking inside of each student to find their own approach, their own style and to encourage them to do it their way. [S58-2a-Mixed-F-EU]

The desire for tutors to be curious about students' creative intentions and aspirations and to advise him or her accordingly is explored further in the section on 'Being understood, making sense of feedback and assessment'.

## BEING UNDERSTOOD, MAKING SENSE OF FEEDBACK AND ASSESSMENT

The Year 1 report examined the way that students seek, or avoid feedback, interpret it, and internalise or ignore it. It also explored the differing environments and conventions that operate within courses: some overtly competitive, others promoting a collaborative ethos. In this report, we build on this analysis by asking: given that students have now had more than a year's experience of being students at UAL, what habits of mind, practices and relationships have they formed with respect to feedback and the assessment of their work?

### Interpreting feedback in the context of relationships with tutors

There were some students who formed positive working relationships with tutors, often there was continuity in these relationships over more than one term, and occasionally over more than one year. Students in this category were most often White, home students but it did also include a small number of Home Asian and a very few international students. The advantages of such relationships were manifold. First, such students were able to benefit from a situation in which the tutor understood their intentions, and advised them in a way that was consonant with their aspirations:

I got a B plus for this one because we had two tutors marking it ... from my first year [one of whom] I actually love, and they said they couldn't pick a fault with my project. They thought it was really good and it would be a really good project to carry on for third year. So I was really pleased with the outcome, actually...I went through the portfolio ... she said my presentation's getting better but I still need to work on [it]. So I looked more into that after I've obviously finished the project, I've been researching a bit more. But she was saying there are lots of different areas here that you could take forward, so it made me think about different ways of manipulating the fabrics that I've done. Maybe I could take that technique further on. So I went away with a lot of notes and thinking about what I could improve on as well. [S71-2b-F-Wh-H]

Students who benefit from interactions on feedback often recall that they were able to develop both technical skills and conceptual thinking as a result. Tutors are perceived to show a genuine interest in and respect for their work which is 'all laid out' and discussed in some detail.

... it was the interim crit, it was positive. [The tutor] really liked it because it had a message, it communicated what it needed to do, which I'm always very conscious about in my projects, because that is our cause, communications, so if it doesn't communicate something like what I intended to do, then it doesn't work and I have to go back again. ...it was only the colour that needed to change, ...because it looked harsh... one other student thought that my design was too simple. She commented ... that she liked it, but there wasn't design thought into it. But then it was funny because [the tutor] backed me up. [He] was, like, 'I don't think so because she thought about the materials, how the material manipulated the message and how everything gets put together in one piece, so it doesn't matter ...it's flat, it doesn't look as well designed as some other people's lovely illustrations..., he said it's more about the message coming across and if it works, it works. Sometimes even the simplest poster can work really well, depending on what it's intending to do... [S03-2a-F-Ch-H]

In the example above the sense of accord between student and tutor is re-enforced in the context of a critical discussion among a wider group of students. 'The intellectual project that is the course' is both reproduced and displayed for the other students. The students' valorisation comes from both the consonance between her values and those of the tutor and from the implicit favourable social comparison in relation to other students.

Some students observed a progression in the way that tutors regarded students from the first to the second year:

...the second year I feel is more like they're trying to understand your work. So they see what kind of designer you as a personality. So the feedback they tell you and also on crit day they can categorise you, what kind of designer you are maybe, so say you like, [style]] but that's why they tell you what should you more look at. Tutorials as well, they suggest artists, particularly me, I like it. [S22-2a-M-Wh-EU]

A further interesting feature of these relationships – more apparent in other examples - is that they easily withstand disagreements between tutors and students: differences of opinion are part of a rapport, often dealt with in a light-hearted way that re-enforces rather than undermines the students' confidence. Moreover, the existence of this rapport as a matter of course, enables students to receive negative feedback with resilience and with a willingness to act on it,

I was actually quite happy with my portfolio, but the feedback I got was that it was not ready at all and there was actually quite a bit missing from it, which... I'm not feeling bad about because it's obviously it's all good feedback and it was really thorough feedback as well. So I know exactly what I need to do to get it up to scratch. ... So I've got to focus on that at the moment before I start applying to places I think. [S43-2b-F-Wh-H]

When feedback is read in isolation from an ongoing rapport within such relationships, it is more likely that students will misinterpret it or read it ways that corrode their confidence. For example, the student below interprets written negative feedback in relation to his portfolio as negating his development over two years:

she also wrote stuff like 'this doesn't really represent the work you've done in the two years' so that really hit me... so what I've been learning is worthless. [S46-2b-Other Asian-H]

This student interpreted this feedback as being about him personally and as an all-encompassing comment about his capabilities as a designer, even though at a later point he observed that this tutor 'doesn't really know me much'. The tendency to interpret feedback in this way seemed to be associated with students who were unfamiliar with the equivalent work of their peers. So this student, for example, had not seen any portfolios other than his own.

For some students, the grade has significant symbolic and emotional value:

at first I was putting so much effort into the [work], thinking, okay, I'm going to jump off for a second and try and elaborate on these grades I've been getting. The first one was a C plus, okay, it's a pass, I'm not too upset because it's something that I'm not an expert on. The second one I did I put double the amount of effort in, C plus again, the third one I put treble the amount of effort in, and C plus again. I said to myself, no matter what I do or what I submit, I'm always going to get a C plus. I don't know if that was a mind block in my head thinking that, or the tutor saying this guy is just, he submits the same type of work, I don't know. [S53-2b-M-other Asian-H]

The student quoted above assumes that there is a direct correlation between the amount of effort he puts in and the grade he is awarded. The symbolic value of the grade is dominant so whilst he does read the qualitative comments he is unable to interpret them and is left unsure of how he can improve his grade. This was a student who had felt unfairly treated in the first year and so there was a cumulative impact of low grades without the prospect of developing a qualitative understanding of evaluative judgements.

A few students saw tutors' feedback as contestable and as part of a much larger context of working in an environment where they would get feedback from peers and a range of others:

To be honest, sometimes [the tutor] says something, and I think, 'oh, maybe'. But most of the feedback actually comes from your friends and your fellow students, because the tutors, ... They'll come in maybe once or twice a week. But at the end of the day you know what you're doing, so it's not that helpful. But in a way that's what the whole thing works towards: that you think for yourself. That you have confidence in yourself, confidence in your decisions, ... I always call it the counsel, when all your friends are standing around going: hmm-mmm, hmm. [S11-M-Wh-EU]

For some students their own assessment and their concern with how their work will be perceived by prospective employers were more important considerations than tutor assessments and grades:

...every time I do a project at Uni, I'm not really thinking about what my Tutor, well, obviously I'm thinking about what they will say because I want their feedback, I respect their feedback. I want them to like it and they give me advice and I try and listen to it but I always think, how is this going to look in my portfolio when I show it to someone, do you know what I mean? I don't really think many design studios are that worried about what grade you got, they're more worried about what your work is like and what you are like as a person. [S34-2a-M-Wh-H]

## Feedback and assessment practices that hamper development

Above, we have considered a number of ways in which students interpret feedback and the importance they attach to tutor feedback as opposed to their own or their peers' evaluative judgments. We now turn to consider particular tutor practices which structure students' orientations toward feedback. There were some practices among tutors which seemed to result in feelings of being misunderstood and demoralisation. For example in some courses, or at certain stages within some courses, tutors appeared to have a policy of giving consistently low grades to all but the most exceptional work. Students who observed this suggested it could be because the tutors were attempting to motivate them to work harder but the affect that seemed most common was that student felt discouraged and less confident about their capacity to succeed.

It was often the case that day-long feedback sessions where students came in singly or in groups to see one or more tutors often over-ran with students coming just before lunchtime or at the end of the day feeling that their feedback was so brief as to be barely meaningful: one student felt that the pressure to represent her work in such a short period of time caused her to:

get really stressed when I have to ... talk really quickly and, the words don't come out, and to sum up everything it's really difficult. [S04-2b-Wh-F-EU]

In this next example, brevity of feedback is experienced as particularly disappointing because it contrasted with a previously very thorough and personal approach from a first year tutor:

...my feedback was terrible. They don't even lay your work out, they don't even talk through, what you've done wrong. What you should do for next time. Literally, I just got read a piece of paper, and I had to be like, well, did I pass or not? And, then, the person was like, yes. it was literally two minutes. ...I was expecting... Because, [first year tutor] was amazing, she would lay it out, talk through every little thing, even the technical part, whereas, [this time] there was another tutor in the room, and then somebody else came, ... I didn't enjoy it, at all. [S85-2a-F-Wh-Int]

In this example, the feedback was partly being read out because the tutor who had carried out the assessment was not there to deliver the feedback – another tutor, who did not know the work, was undertaking this task.

In other instances several students doing the same assignment perceived that their feedback had been terse and expressed in a somewhat authoritarian style:

When the grades came through and they had the little box where they tick what you've done right and wrong and how you can improve it, when you read it, it comes across very, not rude but just sharp and you didn't do this, you didn't do that. It didn't explain how you could have improved. [S62-2b-Asian-H]

The students were left feeling the feedback had been unjust because many of the shortcomings that had been pointed out were perceived to be caused by the limitations of facilities and equipment they were using and that they had not been properly prepared for the use of media that they were using for the first time:

... we were all pretty new to it, and it's all these things that they marked us down on when it's not really our fault. ...we didn't really get enough help ... or teaching for you to say that. If they'd given us 20 hours of teaching and then said that, then it's like, okay, yes, fair enough. But if it's like an hour and a half, of teaching and they come back and say you need to do this, this, this and this, and it's like, well, but I wish you'd taught me or showed me how to, at least. [S63-2b-F-Asian-H]

After the students complained, another tutor held a feedback session with them in which they talked about examples of 'good' assignments only. This had the effect of further demoralising those whose work was not shown because the implication was that it was not 'good enough'. Nevertheless, the discussion itself was experienced by the students whose work was shown as defensive, where a critique of the way the assignment had been supported rumbled on beneath what was ostensibly a feedback session. It is interesting to note that in this case none of the students were discontented with their grades, it was the perceived unfairness of tutors' expectations, the lack of care and genuine interest in the work and creative intentions that rankled with them.

Arbitrary feedback seemed to be a fairly common experience. Often tutors would be heard as saying 'I don't like that' and students were not able to explain why. In this next example, arbitrary feedback seems to be compounded by its delivery in a way that embarrassed the student:

I showed my tutor my work and I thought it was really good but she didn't agree with me and she basically just took my fabric ... And she was holding my fabric and asking everyone 'is there anyone who wants to wear anything like this?' She said it in a funny way but my face just turned red. So she said 'I didn't mean anything to hurt you, I was just telling you maybe you can try some [other] fabric', but I don't want to use [the tutor's preferred fabric]. That's the point I told her I don't want to use [it]. She said you can try and look at that so bring some and I was like 'okay I will try it'. I tried it and it looks good so that's good to know but still at that point I felt really bad. [S76-2a-F-Ch-Int]

With only the students' account, it's impossible to know what the tutor's intention was in this case – one can imagine that she was seeking to encourage some experimentation for example. Nevertheless, the student's experience of that interaction indicates some of the pitfalls in the use of the tutor's power in the studio setting. The student was later asked whether she thought the tutor as trying to push her to experiment or imposing her own taste. She felt that it was a 'a bit of both' and overall the experience had given her a useful different perspective.

Contradictory feedback from two or more tutors can have both positive and negative effects on students' development. The following student heard quite contrasting advice from a guest tutor and another course tutor. Asked whether the experience of negotiating a path between them had been positive or negative, he is equivocal:

Both kind of, it's positive in a way that it makes you think more about your own work and what you really want to do about it, but at the same time you kind of need a sort of professional

direction in a way because sometimes I can't be aware of things that maybe a person who has been in this industry for like a long time can suggest another way how can I get to somewhere where I want to get. I think that the tutors should find out what kind of work I really like and then suggest to me like their take on like to how to get there. [S22-2b-M-Wh-EU]

There were occasions where tutors attempted to orchestrate peer feedback and the extent of their success seemed to vary considerably. In one instance, where the group was small (around 20) students reported learning a great deal both from giving feedback and receiving it, even though the time allocated to each students' work was uneven. Their involvement as a group built the discussion around themes of difference and commonality and so the pattern of interaction where the tutor comments on each piece of work in turn did not dominate. In another instance, in a much larger group of over 80 students, work was displayed on walls and students were asked to give positive and negative questions and ideas for development. This highly structured approach provided little means for students to be orientated into the giving or critical feedback or indeed its reception. There was no space in this structure for tutors to demonstrate the possibilities and some students struggled to benefit from the experience:

...Quite nice to see what other people come up with. Yes there was a lot of interesting stuff in there. But I find – I think I'm – I said that students don't have that much to say, I would be like 'wow that looked really awesome'. Or 'wow that doesn't really look that awesome'. But I never had anything really constructive to say about it. I didn't really know where to start. ...also just writing it down on paper. We had these tiny little boxes and it's like if I'm going to say something – it's not going to be like an antidote. It is not going to be like go to this website it's going to be something that I think about it. I ended up writing a couple of things and I ended up taking half the space... I don't think it needed to be separated into good, bad, negative because they were going to read the comments anyway. They would be able to figure it out for themselves. [S41-2b-M-Wh-H]

Finally, some students reported sometimes getting feedback that did not take into account the timescale to which they had to work and which seemed to assume they had no other commitments and unlimited resources:

I take [feedback] on board, I'm not like, no I've done it and that's that. So it's useful, sometimes, it hurts your pride a little bit but I think you need to have that. As long as you can understand where it's coming from and on occasion it's been like 'you find out for yourself' but I could find out for myself if I wait a few months but I've got a deadline. Sometimes it's not helpful, certain teaching methods where almost like they're doing a Yoda approach. It's just like 'it's not working', 'why?' 'Go and find out'. And it's just like, 'Come on, give me a break'. I'm certainly expecting more specific help, it might work really well for other people but it doesn't for me. [S59-2b-F-Wh-H]

## POSSIBLE SELVES

'Possible selves are representations of the self in the future, including those that are ideal and hoped for as well as those that one does not wish for' (Stevenson and Clegg 2011:3). Drawing on the North American literature in this area Stevenson and Clegg see the possible self as linking self-concept and motivation, having both cognitive and affective dimensions. Possible selves can be affirmed or threatened by those around us and family contexts have been shown to be significant for their development. In their own empirical study, Stevenson and Clegg find that possible selves are 'deeply infused by class and gender and the cultural capital students were able to draw on, as well as by how their activities were institutionally valued and discursively framed within the employability agenda'(2011:7). The analysis that follows uses the concept of the possible self to illuminate the significance of students' explicit aspirations about their futures, the kind of paid and unpaid work they undertook, and also the ways in which they chose to spend their Summer vacations.

As this is interview data with year 2 students one would expect preliminary thinking about life after graduation among the students and we may anticipate that this thinking will become less tentative in the course of year 3 (and 4 for those completing over 4 years). This preliminary thinking was very much in evidence among the students but they varied along a number of dimensions: the degree of certainty they expressed about their aspirations, the extent to which they had taken practical steps toward their ultimate goals, the extent to which their options were limited or expanded by material resources at their disposal, familial support, course context and their beliefs about how their future self may come about.

## Degrees of certainty

It is worth recalling from the year 1 findings that some students, even at that stage, already thought of themselves as predominantly practitioners rather than students. This would seem to be a distinctive characteristic of art and design students who very often have been drawing, designing, sewing and making from an early age. We saw in year 1, how often this early identification as practitioner was associated with students having family members and/or friends who were themselves working in the creative arts.

There were 4 students (3 from graphic design courses, 1 in fashion) who expressed certainty that they would not become designers in their fields. One of the graphic designers aspired to be a teacher and tailored assignments toward this interest. The rationale for this choice was that graphic design was 'fun' and the student felt that doing it professionally would spoil the enjoyment of it. Fundamentally, there was a belief here that 'work' was not, and could not be 'fun'. A second graphic design student came to a judgement over time that she was 'not as good' as other students and did not believe she would succeed in getting a job in graphic design: she was however considering related options for example, pursuing a career as a buyer or another kind of strategic planning within the creative sector. The third simply wanted to combine graphic design within a broader social creative practice and sought internships that would give her relevant experiences. The fashion student who had discounted becoming a designer had decided that he lacked the discipline required to succeed, but aspired to a related role within fashion. These students were exceptional in expressing certainty that they would not practice within the field for which their course was primarily preparing them.

Many more students had a degree of certainty that they would, or at least profoundly wished, to become designers. This was particularly the case within fashion. One student, asked what kind of designer she wished to be, responded immediately:

A world renowned one. I think I will be quite an open-minded designer, but obviously able to tap into past and move it forward and give it a fresh look of things. Quite a conscientious designer. I'm looking forward to the future. I just have a really good feeling that I am where I should be and as long as I put the hard work in, I should be able to be at the right place at the right time. [S21-2a-Wh-F-H]

There were clear practical reasons for this students' confidence. In addition to doing well in her course work and acquiring a series of internships, she had:

...been offered by about three individual people to invest in me because they have seen my designs ... but I don't want to just take money from someone. I'd rather wait until I feel ready. I don't feel ready right now. So potentially next summer I may do like a small collection, very small collection, but it's taking the money from the right kind of person, not just for the sake of it. ...Yes, basically. So I am thinking long term about things.

What is also evident in the quote above and in many other students' accounts was the belief that success would be dependent upon and determined by their own individual hard work. This belief, its prevalence and impact will be explored further as the fieldwork relating to placement years progresses.

Some students expressed certainty at the start of year 2, particularly about wishing to have their own design label, and adjusted their ambitions after the experience of internships which helped to hone their ideas about how they would realise their aspirations:

I really don't know at the moment. It's like [getting my own label] is the ultimate plan, but I've been thinking, because it's more real now as to how it's going to happen and I think it'll be better maybe to work for someone for a couple of years to see their mistakes and their successes and ...just learn from being in a different company as well. But, then again, doing internships, I just hate working for people... my hard work going into their company with no outcome for myself, like no recognition. [S71-2b-W-Wh-H]

For students who aspired to be designers but had less certainty as to how their aspirations would be realised, sometimes the transition between being a student and starting to think of oneself as a practitioner was characterised by a feeling of being stretched between contradictory imperatives. Those courses that incorporated an option to intern for a year and complete DPS tended to concentrate that transition within year two:

I think it's more about... I would love it to be a lot about trying out things and failing and trying again... I really want to experiment and try different techniques and different materials and different aesthetics, maybe even to kind of all add that to my personal idea of what I want to do....but the problem here is that because we need to go on a year out, so we need to prepare the portfolio, which should become like a cohesive story, where an employer would get what you're about as a person, as a designer. So you have to find a middle between that... I notice other people wanting to take risks, design-wise, but not being able to, are restricting themselves because they say they want to get good jobs and stuff like that. [S11-2a-M Wh EU]

This student situated this tension within a wider institutional shift: he felt that design in higher education, and his college in particular, was becoming more vocational and less arts school focused; and the introduction of fees carried the practical implication for him that it was no longer a viable option to repeat a year in the event that a process of experimentation had ultimately been unproductive.

## **Resources for conceptualising and realising possible selves**

Students often recounted a hierarchy of possibilities that they had gleaned from their course teams, guest speakers and broader environments. For example, working for the Guardian was at one point considered the pinnacle of journalism, certain agencies were favoured by other text-based subjects, most fashion design students regarded having their own label as the ultimate aim, and graphic designers tended to think of a dual track of freelancing or working for an agency or publishing house, again with the ultimate aim of owning their own business. This left the students (4 within this sample) who had already decided firmly that they would not go down any of these routes in a small minority. None of them had spoken to tutors or others about their intentions, some suspected that they would get less good support within courses whose aim was to prepare students for these professions. Students did recount occasionally, that tutors said to them that they did not expect all students, for example, doing a course in journalism to go into journalism. However, these students were not aware of how they might access support or networks within UAL where they could plan for their transition to these related professions. One of the ways in which students were able to broaden their thinking about their possible selves was through attending talks by guest speakers: this was often a means of finding out about different specialisms and the potential for work in other

countries. This was also a means for students from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to see and hear a broader range of practitioners than might be represented within their course team.

There is also an interplay between the way students think about their future selves and how students spend their Summers. This in turn is also related to whether they take up paid work in the Summer and/or during term time. Within this cohort of students none of the international students took up paid work that was unrelated to their practice during the summers and neither did they do so during term time. A few undertook voluntary work during term time or during the summers that was also not clearly linked to their practice. The five EU students did paid work during the Summer and three worked during term-time as well. For many international students the summers usually incorporated a break, a vacation at home or abroad with family and/or friends. Many home students who worked during term time also managed to travel and have holidays – term-time working was more common than Summer-time work.

Paid work, unrelated to course work, was undertaken by all the Home students except 7. All of these students were second-generation entrants to HE with parents (or partners) who supported them financially. Five of these students were White, and two were Asian. All of the Black students, and first generation students undertook paid work. Whilst some did benefit from parental financial support, this was not enough to allow them a choice about whether they should or should not take up paid work. One student was expected to help her family financially and several had caring responsibilities in addition to their paid work. Those who did paid work ranged in their working hours from 10 to 45 hours per week during term time. The upper end of that range was rare – the majority worked for between 15 and 20 hours during term time.

These variations – most starkly between home and international students, between a well-resourced minority of home students and all other home students - are significantly wide: the difference in material resources between having to do no paid work whatsoever, and those supporting themselves entirely was huge. In the case of one student who took up an eight-week internship:

I was working full time and I was doing an internship at the same time. So then three days a week I would be at the internship and the other four days I'd be working. So I was working every day. ...It was a small design firm and they mostly worked on websites and logos that was their main work. I had to do other things like flyers and booklets. They did booklets for schools and educational booklets and I had to work on those.

None of the self-initiated internships that students took up during term time or during the summers were paid. A few paid expenses or provided lunch. Consequently, to take up an internship, many home students had to save up in advance or to call on help from family. Most students were resigned to this condition of obtaining experience and valued what they learnt:

I feel like I learnt quite a lot actually because when I'm at uni I feel like you learn the theory side of it but when you're actually in the real work you learn a different side of it. [The difference is] the work pace; you have to do a lot of work in a short period of time. The research, so when I'm at uni we get marked mostly on our research and then the final outcome is not even that important. But in the real world it's all about the final outcome and not so much about the research. [S55-2a-M-BI-H]

Students who did not need paid work could go into their final year having already had experience of several internships – particularly within fashion. Those who did need paid work sometimes took up part-time or very short-term internships.

Not all that students learnt through internships was positive. Sometimes what they learnt was that some employers had no qualms about requiring them to work long hours, often doing work that was of little developmental value. Exploitation in the form of pressure to work very long hours or to continue working after an agreed period was much more common in fashion than in the other subject areas. On the whole, home and EU students who experienced this seemed more able to set boundaries. It seemed harder for some international students, one of whom became ill as a result of the stress and pressure she experienced but felt unable to complain to the employer or through the college for fear of what she perceived as possible repercussions to her future prospects.

The extent to which students believed it was necessary for them to gain internships also varied. On the whole, fashion students, with a few exceptions, took for granted the need for internships – some took part in internships as part of the curriculum and others took DPS. Similarly many of the graphic design students applied for DPS. Their experiences in this year will be explored in the Year 3 report.

To conclude this section, thinking about future possible selves remains preliminary for most students but there are different degrees of certainty about their aspirations. The possibilities for the future are structured by their course environment to some extent and by their familial and financial resources. Course environments, especially guest lecturer events and alumni visits, play an important role in opening up the range of possible selves to which students aspire.

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND ONE RECOMMENDATION

This report is the second within this longitudinal study, and we have yet to see what the outcomes are for this cohort of students in terms of their degree classification and first destinations. Nevertheless, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the year 2 experience.

During year 2 significant variation seems to open up in the extent to which students are able to become absorbed and immersed in their work. The findings describe what the hallmarks of this absorption are: prolonged periods of solitary work, a capacity and enthusiasm for talking about work, a confidence in a honed process, the development of expert behaviours, an appetite for experimentation with techniques and in relation to one's own habits, a wish to seek out feedback from friends and others, and sometimes a tendency to collaborate with others. A series of factors in students' lives act either to fuel this absorption in work or to impede it: familial context, material resources, and above all the quality of relationships with tutors, the curriculum and experiences of feedback and assessment. There is often an inter-play between these factors: for example, students with fewer material resources or less good relationships with tutors will find it harder to sustain their practice in the event of short-term crises.

Students' thoughts about their future possible selves remain fluid in year 2. However, disparities are discernible in the degree of certainty they express about their aspirations, the extent to which they have the resources to take active steps towards them. A crucial resource here is time, and its availability is tightly bound with the need to undertake paid work, which in turn is closely linked to familial context.

### **How representative are these findings?**

The students have been cluster-sampled to include representation from different minority ethnic groups as well as the White ethnic majority; they include international, and home (including EU) students. They did self-select to an open invitation and so it is possible that they do differ from the general population in some ways. To date, there has been no discernible evidence that this is the case. The evidence, for example in the rate of retention, is that they are not outliers, but rather that they do represent a considerable range of experience that is present in the larger population of UAL students.

These qualitative findings utilise that variation (for example by comparing student accounts) to explore *mechanisms of causation* which lie behind the statistical correlations. Specifically these findings, illuminate why it is that some groups of students – Black African Black African-Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and other non-White and mixed backgrounds – are less likely than their White counterparts to attain a first or upper-second degree. Because these correlations have been established and are persistent over a number of years, it is possible to claim that those mechanisms of causation that are described in this report *more often* disadvantage members of the afore-mentioned minority groups than they do the White majority group.

### **Don't these patterns in students' experiences occur for all students, regardless of their racial background?**

These patterns of causation do occur in the experience of all students but they occur more frequently for Black and Minority Ethnic students than they do for White students. It is important to note that 50% or more of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students do attain a

first or upper-second degree and inevitably, the findings presented here will include accounts from BAME students in that category as well as those who are not. To throw further light (and open up further questions) we can also situate these findings within NSS responses broken down by ethnicity. It is well known at a national level that Black African students are more likely to be dissatisfied with their course. What is less explored is how students from different ethnic groups compare in their responses to the other questions within the NSS. Within UAL there are some notable disparities. For example, in response to the statement 'Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair' 75% of White students agree, 74% of Asian student agree, and 66% of Black students agree. A similar pattern with a slightly smaller gap (8%) between White and Black students is evident in response to the statement 'The course has helped me to present myself with confidence' and a gap of 7% exists with respect to 'I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities and rooms when I needed to.'

At a national level, there is a similar disparity with respect to perceptions of fairness in assessment and it is wider than at UAL between Asian (and students of other ethnicities) on the one hand and White students on the other. There is a much smaller difference at a national level with respect to 'The course has helped me to present myself with confidence' and similarly with respect to access to specialised equipment.

## **What are the practical implications of these findings?**

This report is produced as a resource to be used for raising awareness of a range of student perspectives, of unintended consequences of teaching and assessment practices, and of the effects of certain ways of organising and resourcing learning and teaching.

They are aimed at individual tutors and course teams who may wish to reflect on the ways in which they relate to students who share, or do not share, their own cultural references. It is hoped that those tutors who are already curious about the experiences and perspectives of their students will find avenues of enquiry within the findings that they might pursue with their own students. For example, they might reflect on the characteristics of 'the intellectual project that is the course', the extent to which it reflects the identities of the course team members, and the extent of its relevance to students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The findings are also aimed at course leaders and tutors who may be reviewing assignment briefs, the teaching that supports them and the structure of feedback mechanisms. All the evidence (in education research literature) suggests that students' progress is significantly influenced in the course of formative assessment. Within this study, the evidence is that formative assessment is heavily structured by the quality of working relationships and rapport among tutors and students.

At an institutional level, academic leaders may wish to reflect on the extent to which tutors, course leaders and programme directors are supported and resourced to respond to the issues that have been identified, and to act upon them. There is much potential to stimulate creativity in pedagogy and curriculum development – which has already taken place within UAL (some stimulated by the PG Cert Module in Inclusive Learning) and in the HE sector more widely.

## What next?

There are now two substantial reports arising from this research: in addition to the present year 2 report, the year 1 report, *Becoming Students at UAL: 'Signing up to the intellectual project that is the course'?* There are also associated case studies, extracts of interviews and other materials that have been used in seminars and workshops.

In the coming months and years the project outputs will include:

- A report on the experience of Fine Art students, who have been added to the sample of research participants in 2014/15. This report will be published in Autumn 2015.
- Year 3 report – which will include all four subject areas (graphic design, fashion, text-based subjects and fine art) will be ready in early 2016.
- Finally, the Year 4 report in 2017 will focus on students' first destinations as well as integrate the findings from the fieldwork as a whole, relating students' experiences to their attainment outcomes.

## One recommendation

It is recommended that resources are allocated for the construction of a website that is dedicated to promoting equality in students' outcomes. It should include the outcomes that arise from this project as well as contain resources from the range of developmental initiatives that have been undertaken within UAL, and in the creative HE sector. Over time, it should be possible to collate examples of interventions undertaken by individual tutors that are intended to make a difference to the inequalities in the attainment of students from different groups. These resources should be made accessible to all staff.

In summary, in order to bring about some progress in addressing differentials in attainment, the following resources should be made available through this website to tutors, course leaders and programme directors:

- Statistics that demonstrate the differentials in attainment (as produced by UCPU)
- Information about the causal mechanisms that lie behind these correlations (as presented in this project, among others)
- Information about possible interventions that they can adapt and adopt in their own context.

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