

Students' engagement in industry projects at the University of the Arts, London

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Introduction

Commissioned by Student Enterprise and Employability at the University of the Arts, London, this report examines students' engagement in enterprise and employability, as evidenced in industry projects, sometimes called live projects. This aspect of students' engagement is often missing from current research on student experience and engagement, and does not feature in the UK's National Student Survey. This omission has particular significance for art, design and performance disciplines whose practice within higher education is intricately connected to art and design in the voluntary, public and private sectors. The omission of students' experiences in this area is of course also significant for many vocational disciplines that incorporate in their curricula project work in partnership with external bodies for example in health, engineering, business and social care.

This report is based on interviews with approximately 20 students from three courses at LCF and LCC who collectively took part in five industry projects during stage 2 in 2011/12. There were also brief conversations with the tutors who set up or observed these industry projects. In addition, the researcher was present in five focus groups with staff at Chelsea, Camberwell, LCC and CSM which were part of the data collection for the larger associated landscape review project. The focus groups are analysed in detail in the landscape review report which complements this report on students' engagement.

This project was small-scale, designed primarily with the aim of developing a short survey instrument that would provide UAL staff with a sustainable means of evaluating students' engagement with industry projects across all colleges. This report and associated survey instrument is intended to be of particular benefit to tutors who invest – sometimes a great deal of - their time in developing industry contacts organising industry projects for their students. In time the survey instrument may become a useful source of data to inform prospective students.

The students interviewed for this study were asked about: their understanding of the terms 'employability' and 'enterprise'; the purpose of the industry projects that they had been involved in, and their distinctive characteristics; what benefits they had accrued from their involvement; what they would now do differently; and what developments they would like to see in the organisation of industry projects. The tutors were asked about their own roles in organising industry projects, the process of collaborating with industry partners, how they exercised their pedagogic judgement, their strategies for supporting students through the projects, and the work of assessment where projects were part of the course curriculum.

The findings are presented in four sections. The first defines enterprise and employability, as evidenced in industry projects, as a dynamic process of engagement which may have positive or negative educational value. The next three sections address a series of tensions: the first looks at the conflict inherent in formative feedback and competition; the second explores the competing pressures on tutors to balance pedagogic considerations with the imperatives of collaborating with

an industry partner; and the third looks at the tension for students between pursuing their own creative development and learning to work to an industry brief.

Throughout this report students are referred to as coming from LCF or LCC. No reference is made to the industry projects they took part in so as to preserve the anonymity of both students and tutors.

Understanding enterprise and employability

There was little controversy over the terms 'enterprise' and 'employability' among the students. Both were familiar terms but not widely used. Some said that the terms were familiar but they did not understand what they meant. Others associated 'enterprise' with 'starting your own thing', having a particular attitude of mind that entails 'pushing yourself forward'.

Although there seemed to be some indifference to the discussion of these terms in the abstract, it was possible to discern what the terms signify in practice, in the students' experiences of engaging with live industry projects.

For some students engaging in live projects entailed a departure from developing their work purely in the context of their own preferences:

[it] was quite good for me because I've never worked like that. I've always worked how I wanted to work, not to someone else's idea of how to work. [LCC student]

I was having to challenge myself in a way because I wouldn't have picked that brand. I pushed and stretched myself. [LCF student]

There was also a sense in which it represented a departure from working within the confines of their relationships with tutors and within the university environment. The opportunity to engage with an external client brought to bear external influences that acted as a check on their course as a whole:

[it's a test of] whether the things we are doing and busy with here actually feed demand. You get a sense of realism.

Other students talked about getting 'a down-to-earth idea' as a result of being involved in live projects and this was occasionally associated with feelings of being exploited, of being asked for ideas that had commercial value but not being rewarded as such. 'Exploitation of slave labour' was perceived in one project and students complained that 'they will pay you nothing'.¹

This view seemed more prevalent when students were involved in projects that seemed to them to have little pedagogic value. The variation among students on this point seemed partly related to the extent of their success in the competitive process that usually accompanies live projects. Students who were shortlisted and selected were insightful about how the experience had shaped their capacity to understand a brand identity, an associated business plan and how both of these related to the design brief given. They also expanded their capacity to operate in the industry context:

I did expand my network because the product was based on my design. I got to know more people and became more confident. I have a project now with another online company and I know what

¹ The differential impact of unpaid work on students of different social backgrounds and financial resources – whether through placements or extra-curricular live projects – is well documented. See for example Allen et al (2012).

questions to ask. In the future I will probably end up having my own brand. I learnt about how to control a brand, it gave me encouragement and confidence. [LCF student]

The student quoted above makes several important gains through his involvement in the industry project: the expanded network of contacts is linked to a growth in personal confidence, which is not so much an attribute as a dynamic process of building an identity, a way of being and knowing in the industry context. These gains make it possible for the student to both acquire work with an online company during his course and to imagine a future self where he will 'end up having [his] own brand'.

Students in this or similar position were aware that other students who had not been successful in the competitive process had not benefitted in the same way. There was awareness in one project that:

A couple of people got very upset. One worked really hard and didn't get selected. Even if it's really good it might not be right for a client. [LCC student]

This philosophical response was not evident for students (from another project) who also felt they had put in a lot of effort. Their sense of disillusionment seemed to engender doubt about their own work and a distrust of the process as a whole which was dubbed 'fictional' because the industry partner was perceived as only feigning interest in the students' work. For some other students whose work did not get selected it was possible to come away from the experience with some educational gains. As one tutor put it:

They learn how to respond to industry. They also become better prepared and energised to be aware of their own professional conduct.

What was less clear from the students is the extent to which they become reflexively critical about the basis on which judgements are made in the context of the industry project.

In conclusion, conceptualising 'enterprise and employability' as abstract skills or attributes seems less fruitful than deriving the features of students' dynamic engagement from accounts of their own experience. Industry projects of course represent only one type of experience in relation to enterprise and employability and the accounts here are specific to five projects. What these accounts suggest is that students' experience of industry projects needs to be understood within the social contexts in which it occurs and in relation to its educational form and value. As Dewey (1934) reminds us educational experience is not necessarily developmental in a positive way, he warns of the possibility that experience may well result in the narrowing of conditions for subsequent learning (1938/1997, p. 37). In the next two sections we consider the pedagogic role of tutors in situating industry projects in the curriculum, in influencing the competitive process, and attending to the needs both of the students who succeed and those who do not.

The elements of competition and feedback

The elements of formative feedback and competition – both intrinsic parts of the industry project process – are bound to be in tension. Optimum conditions for formative feedback include opportunities for low risk trial and error, interest in the task for its own sake, and the absence of favourable or unfavourable social comparison (Black and Wiliam 1998). On the other hand the involvement of an industry partner heavily circumscribes the scope for maintaining such conditions

because their interest is in identifying and selecting the best product or design, as they perceive it, for their own purposes. The students' risk of failure is high (only one, two perhaps three students' work is included in a final selection). The selection process is necessarily public though the rationale that underpins it may not be transparent or easily comprehensible to the students, and this in turn promotes the mystique and symbolism that goes with favourable and unfavourable social comparison.

The following account illustrates these issues:

She went through all the work and chose about 10 people to talk to about their work. So it was good for those 10 people to sit down and talk to her about what she liked in their work and why it would work for them. Obviously everyone could have done with that. [LCC student]

The student above is referring to the process whereby all students produced work for a client brief, and a proportion – whose work the client considers is worth talking about – have the opportunity to discuss their work with her. The students whose work is not chosen have a fairly limited interaction with the industry partner: they have received and interpreted the project brief but the interaction has ended without resolution as far as the students are concerned.

The proportion of students who are selected at this first stage is a point of tension: the more that can be selected to have that conversation with the client, the greater the number of students who will learn from that interaction. But the client's priorities cannot be expected to revolve around the optimum conditions for formative assessment. And in any case, how does one decide what proportion of students it is fair or acceptable to exclude from that opportunity?

Other possibilities for tutors' consideration must centre around the extent to which the judgement processes can be made public and transparent (which is not to say that all judgements are easy to articulate). Nevertheless, the less mystique that surrounds the client's judgement the more students will be in a position to adopt a critical and informed stance in relation to the non-selection of their own work. The alternative for students is to conflate the rejection of the piece of work with a symbolic rejection of their personal style as designers. In some projects tutors often mediate client responses and proactively help students whose work is not selected to reflect critically on the experience, as the last quote in the section above suggests.

Enterprise and learning

There is a tension for tutors between the enterprise element of making contact with an industry partner and establishing a mutually beneficial relationship, on the one hand, with adhering to pedagogic priorities on the other. One tutor summarised the challenge as she saw it:

Working with an industry partner is not just about the brand having a high profile, it's also about the company input. Sometimes it works better when they contribute less money. A good example is [X] where they ran a competition with [target customer group] where the prize was to work with the designers.

The tutor quoted above draws attention to the importance of how the industry partner conceptualises the partnership and what value they place on the students' input. She goes on to share the ways in which she influences (and meets) the industry partner expectations:

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An industry project has to fit with the course outcomes. In the initial meeting I showed them the course handbook. The relationship and knowledge of the course builds as they do the specification sheets. The industry partner also gets a list of what the students will hand in. Their expectations need to be met.

In this project the tutor is highly conscious of the relationship between the industry project and the curriculum as a whole: both the content and timing of the industry project are geared towards developing an area of expertise that the students had worked on during stage one. The development of the project brief is a process of collaboration with the industry partner.

In contrast, some tutors may choose to take a more passive stance in relation to industry project briefs, perhaps believing that part of the learning process for students is to interpret poorly written or conceived briefs. Here is the experience of one student in this situation:

It was very different [to the other projects]. They gave us a brief before the Summer and it was so big that I had no idea what I should be doing. Talking to a lot of people they were really worried about it and I didn't get shortlisted for it. The the lady came to speak to us, no-one knew what they were supposed to be doing. They originally wanted 3 themes – past, present and future. At first they said it had to be about [well-known designer], then they said it didn't have to be anything to do with him, and then they said it had to reference him. So it was all these different things, shifting the goal posts. [LCC student]

If the tutor's rationale had been to help students deal with unclear briefs, there was no evidence that the students had reflected explicitly on that as a challenge. They were not in a position, for example, to generalise about what makes a good or poor brief and how they as designers might negotiate with clients about an opening brief.

To summarise, tutors are often rightly concerned with gaining and developing relationships with industry partners which will promote their course, and by implication the future prospects of their students. At times this purpose can operate as a constraint on the deployment of their own pedagogic expertise in industry projects. Among the pedagogic priorities that they consider (or might deem less important) are:

- establishing the students' interest in the client or market
- supporting the brief with curricular content, for example in relation to a new market helping to develop market research skills, or in relation to historical design references
- translating or providing a means of translation – in terms of language, or business imperative.
- relating the brief to what has gone on before in the students' experience – how does it build developmentally?

Three further pedagogic considerations arise from the tension described in the previous section in relation to formative assessment and competition:

- What is the best structure for selection: at what stage will students be excluded from the process and how will that exclusion be managed?
- How far can the basis for selection judgements be made transparent and critically discussed?

- What should be the frequency and nature of the contact between the students and the industry partner?

Managing tensions: creativity, enterprise and future selves

In 2009 while interviewing third year graphic design students at CSM, a group of students expressed some ambivalence about taking part in industry projects. One student said:

For some it's better to do your own project because it's more continuous. Some of us want to work on our own portfolios. If you just do the briefs you're not in control of what you're doing sometimes. [CSM stage 3 student, 2009]²

This degree of absorption in developing one's own work, and having continuity that allowed for long-term conceptual development was not greatly in evidence among the 20 or so students who were interviewed for this project. When asked directly about this point, a few recognised the possibility of a dilemma but on the whole, they welcomed the opportunity to participate in industry projects:

I think it's important to do with – you need a live project to put you in that position. You learn so much from that but not everyone would agree with having so many so you can develop your signature style. [LCF student]

Particularly for students whose work was selected and who made personal contacts, the benefits were considerable:

I got a chance to present my work to them. I enjoyed the project anyway but given the chance to present my work was excellent. They offered me an internship later on. I couldn't do it because I was already doing one but that was the best thing. Lots of people wouldn't get the chance to do that.

It was evident that some students' experience suggested that they needed, in the earlier stages of their course experience, a period of creative development that was uninterrupted by the pressures of external industry projects. One student reflected:

I didn't want to do it [the brief] really. I wanted to do it how I wanted. If I was to do it again, I wouldn't do that. [LCF student]

Another student, possibly at a slightly later developmental stage reflects:

Yes, it opened up possibilities. My work was inspired by interaction with the client. Before that I was worried that I couldn't think myself into someone else's mind-set and the way you think about yourself as a designer. [LCC student]

And this student' experience of taking a creative risk paid off with her work being selected for production:

Yes, I never thought past my graduation before that project. I can go out and actually sell work on a free-lance basis. I know I can do that. [LCC student]

² Sabri, D. (2010) Student Departure and Persistence in Art and Design, UAL. Website: www.arts.ac.uk/retention

Several students argued that the process of adaptation to a client brief was essential to their development and future prospects. They also felt that it was within their means to be in control of the creative development:

It does help you to adapt your style to fit with a brand that you're working for. You might get a job with a company and it may not be what you thought it was, so you need to be able to adapt. [LCF student]

I think we're really lucky to be able to do it. You've got a whole year to do it and the projects are really varied. I probably didn't enjoy all of them the same. I don't see how people can complain about it. [LCF student]

As one tutor pointed out, the tension between developing a personal signature style (or artistic identity) and attending to a client brief manifests itself in different ways across disciplines. It is a more pertinent consideration in some courses than in others. Moreover, there seems to be some variation that is related to students' stage of development as designers or artists. The foregoing discussion demonstrates that there is a potential benefit in making this tension an explicit and legitimate point of discussion when students are considering taking part (or being required to take part) in industry projects.

Summary and Conclusions

This report has shown that enterprise and employability are developed in industry projects in a dynamic process of student engagement. Students' engagement in industry projects does not necessarily result in a broadening of their enterprise and employability horizons: it can lead to less confidence and can be experienced as an unwelcome interruption to creative development. However, many students, particularly those who succeed in the competitive process make important gains in which they come to see their present and future selves as fully-fledged free-lancers or envision having their own brand.

Tutors and students are often negotiating a series of tensions that come to the fore in the setting up and running of industry projects. The first revolved around the possibility of conflict between optimum conditions for formative assessment and the imperatives of high-risk competition between students. The second tension is that which tutors face between promoting their course through its association with a high-profile brand on the one hand, and negotiating an involvement from the industry partner which takes into account the students' educational needs. The third tension is one that students sometime experience as they seek to balance the development of their own artistic endeavour or signature style with the demands of industry-led briefs.

The findings are presented as tensions intentionally to provoke debate. The issues that these tensions embrace were not experienced as being in conflict for all students, for all tutors, or in equal measure in all the industry projects. The draft survey instrument which follows does not follow this format, but addresses the issues raised nevertheless. The current version of this instrument has yet to be piloted with students and will doubtless develop further as a result.

Engaging in industry projects: Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions with respect to a specific industry project after its completion. Your responses will inform future design and organisation of industry projects and will not be used in a way that identifies you individually.

Industry project:

Course:

College:

Student ID:

Please rate each of the following statements, where 1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree

Please tick a box to tell about your experience of the industry project.	Strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Overall I benefitted from my experience of the industry project.					
2. I was inspired by the need to think about the client's needs.					
3. Thinking about the client's needs extended my skills.					
4. It interrupted my own creative development in an unproductive way.					
5. I did not find that I could relate or identify with the brief.					

Please tick a box to tell us about the role of the industry partner.	Strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	Strongly disagree
6. The brief was well-constructed					
7. There was sufficient contact with the client during the project.					
8. I benefitted from the client's feedback on my work.					
9. I benefitted from the client's feedback on my fellow students' work.					
10. The assessment of my work was fair.					

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Please tick a box to tell us about how the industry project fits into your course.	Strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	Strongly disagree
11. Our tutor helped us to interpret the brief.					
12. I could see how the project brief related to earlier parts of this course.					
13. As a result of the project I have a good network among my peers that will help me after graduation.					
14. The project has introduced me to a community of practice beyond this course.					
15. The project has helped me build up contacts beyond this course.					

Please tick a box to tell us how the industry project has influenced how you think about your future practice.	Strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	Strongly disagree
16. My experience on the project made me realise I could sell my work.					
17. The project enabled me to put my work in a bigger context than the course.					
18. The project made me think about a client's needs in relation to my own work.					
19. As a result of my involvement in this project I think more about life after graduation.					
20. The project increased my expectations of myself.					
21. As a result of my involvement I feel demoralised about life after graduation					
22. I feel I have as good a chance of succeeding in my chosen work as any other student on this course.					
23. I have a better understanding of the contacts and networks I will need when I graduate.					

Any other comments you have about this industry project

24. Overall, what would you say were the best aspects of the industry project?

25. Overall, what would you say were the worst aspect of the industry project?

26. If you could improve just one thing for students taking part in industry projects, what would this be?

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