

A new approach to Graduate Employability Skills: Creative Education for a Changing World

All Universities are familiar with the Graduate Outcomes survey and its importance in terms of achieving OfS benchmarks and positioning in league tables. The survey places significant emphasis on the percentage of graduates securing highly skilled professional or managerial employment 15 months after graduation. It is a metric that has placed additional pressure on all universities to evidence value in terms of degree outcomes and one which has proved particularly challenging for small and specialist institutions, operating in sectors such as the creative arts, where successful graduate progression is more nuanced.

This article provides an overview of the strategic approach being adopted by Arts University Plymouth, and outlines some of the activities being developed that aim to enhance our students' employability skills and facilitate their progression into professional creative practice. Looking beyond the short term metrics of the Graduate Outcomes survey, we are focused on longitudinal educational gains, seeking to inspire the kind of innovation that is in demand in the creative industries. This work is a key element within our recently published strategic plan, 'Creative Education for a Changing World'

The Small & Specialist Challenge

Founded in 1856 as Plymouth Drawing School, Arts University Plymouth offers a range of Undergraduate, Postgraduate and Pre-Degree study, delivering art, design, craft and digital media programmes to a dynamic community of around 1,500 UK and international students. We are one of the smallest universities in the UK, and unlike larger more diversified institutions with broad portfolios and research income, our focus on the creative arts presents some financial constraints when seeking to develop employability initiatives. Our location in the South West of the UK can be a barrier to developing productive links with creative industries, and the economic environment of our region can also limit our students' ability to find part-time employment, internships, or highly skilled jobs.

Strategic Approach

Despite these challenges, Arts University Plymouth has bold ambitions and aspires to be a catalyst for positive change. A key ambition in this approach has been a drive to add value to the cultural and economic life of Plymouth and the South West region. Through partnerships and collaborations with a range of organisations, we have a clear commitment to civic engagement and the creative economy, working to create a vibrant cultural and commercial infrastructure for graduate employment. Many of our students want to continue living, working and developing successful creative careers in the South West and we want to equip them with the confidence, knowledge, and skills to do so.

The Skills Agenda & Future Priorities

The National Foundation for Education Research recently conducted an extensive literature review, illustrating that there is some consensus on the essential employment skills expected to be most in demand in the future labour market, across all industry sectors. Their findings demonstrate the increasing importance of work-related capabilities and personal attributes, including analytical and creative skills, self-management, emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. (Taylor et al., 2022)

It was the future skills agenda which influenced the revisioning of Arts University Plymouth's undergraduate curriculum, relaunched in 2020. Our distinctive Common Unit Framework involves a standardised unit structure, with every undergraduate course studying the same unit, with the same title and overriding theme at the same time, but interpreted through a subject-specific lens. Underpinned by a graduate attributes framework and a set of employability skills, the curriculum provides a robust academic framework from which to scaffold levels of learning and student attainment, designed to prepare students for the workplaces of the future.

Whilst maintaining discipline specificity in key areas, our Common Unit Framework has broken down the subject silo approach, providing a space that allows different courses to work together on shared projects. Units such as *Platforms of Exchange* at level 4 require course areas to work together on collaborative projects, developing essential team working and communication skills, whilst building personal confidence. As students progress into Level 5, the next collaborative unit *Global Challenges* requires them to think more deeply about their role and potential as artists, designers and communicators to provide solutions to some of the complex challenges of our times, such as sustainability, precarity and the development of Artificial Intelligence.

Teaching for our Time

This approach to applying creativity and problem solving to real world issues is a core theme in our pedagogy. We have a fundamental commitment to social justice and the University has developed relationships with a number of local and regional charities to support their work, whilst creating learning opportunities for our students.

As outlined in our strategic plan *"We believe that education is the act of turning the student towards the world, to inspire students to want to exist in and care for the world, and to act with kindness as both a method and a means to enact change and deliver positive outcomes"* (AUP, 2023) **Kindness, Authenticity and Fulfilment** are the core principles within teaching philosophy, and these have become exemplified in a number of live brief projects working with partners in the charity sector. This article outlines three of these projects.

Trevi is a nationally award-winning women's and children's charity based in South West England. They provide safe and nurturing spaces for women in recovery and run three centres in Plymouth, including The Sunflower Women's Centre which supports more than 700 local women, many with complex needs and experience of trauma and abuse (Trevi, 2020).

This year, Arts University Plymouth embarked on a new live brief with the Sunflower Centre. Within their *Platforms of Exchange* unit, 1st year students from BA (Hons) Interior Design & Styling and BA (Hons) Textile Design courses have been tasked with working in teams to redesign the centre. The mixed cohort groups have been assigned different rooms, their brief to create coherent, trend-led interior concepts and bespoke textile pieces. Students are encouraged to share the knowledge and skills already developed in their subject, utilising these in a collaborative group project, exposing them to new ways of working in design teams. This can be a challenge for students eager to develop and express their individual creative identity. "Teamwork will make the dream work" has become the mantra in this unit.

Platforms of Exchange has become one of the cornerstones of our Common Unit Framework, and the emphasis on social conscience in a number of our course areas has proved popular with students who are keen to align their creative practice with deeply held personal values.

Another notable live brief project has been developed this year with the charity Shekinah. For over 30 years, Shekinah has supported people in Plymouth to build positive lives by assisting improved physical and mental wellbeing, helping to find accommodation, and giving practical support to find employment (Maturity, 2024). Shekinah raises funds through a number of shops and centres across the city, and 2nd year students from BA (Hons) Interior Design & Styling and BA (Hons) Fashion Media Marketing have been tasked with redesigning a vintage clothing store, relaunching and publicising the revamped shop with an integrated marketing campaign. Situated within their *Ideas and Audience* unit, this project again challenges students to work in creative teams with limited budgets to meet the complex requirements of a live client brief. Students are required to pitch their ideas to a client panel, developing their confidence and presentation skills. At this level the students have also been tasked with fundraising, deploying crowdfunding and seeking sponsorship from local businesses to fund elements of the project. At the time of writing they have already gained commitment from a local building firm to undertake and fund all of the required building work within the store.

Alongside these charity projects, which have immediate demonstrable impact on a local level, elsewhere in the curriculum our students are being presented with live briefs that require them to engage with pressing global issues. Earlier this year, within their *Global Challenges* unit, BA (Hons) Fashion Design students were provided with the unique opportunity to work with *Phoebe English Studio*, an internationally renowned label which has dual roots in textile craftsmanship and reduced environmental impact, working towards sustainable, circular slow fashion design (Phoebe English, no date).

Working on a live brief set, facilitated and jointly assessed by the studio, the students came up with their own clothing range based on repurposing waste materials to make a high end commercial collection, considering critical path, target audience, pricing and marketing strategy. Again, the brief required students to engage with collaborative group working, and

whilst addressing a global challenge, one of the groups also developed their ideas in a local context opting to work with Beach Guardian, a Community Interest Company and activist group based in Cornwall who provided the recycled materials. The group's final collection, taking inspiration from 18th century fishing wear, was unusual but also practical and very wearable. Importantly alongside the valuable experience of working with an international design studio, the brief helped students to appreciate the complexities of the supply chain and production process, and importantly how to commercialise their ideas, reconciling social and ecological values and concerns with commercial enterprise.

These are just three examples of collaborative live projects, designed to develop students' employability skills, whilst encouraging a commitment to social change and the cultural and economic development of our city. Projects such as this are already encouraging our graduates to remain in the South West to develop freelance creative practices, and as the creative economy in the region grows, it is only a matter of time before the impact of these initiatives is reflected in the Graduate Outcomes Survey

The Next Generation of Creatives

Arts University Plymouth is on a bold trajectory creating an innovative and student-centred approach to employability founded on our core values. We prepare our graduates with a real confidence in their abilities to enter the world of work, through a deep relationship to their subject discipline, a resilience to challenge, and an ability to work collaboratively across boundaries. Our vision for the University is a new kind of art school for the 21st century, preparing graduates who are uniquely placed to provide creative solutions to the complex challenges of our times. As the proposition on the side of our building states: **"The World needs Creatives now more than ever."**



REFERENCES

Arts University Plymouth. *Strategic Plan 2030* (2023) Available at: <https://www.aup.ac.uk/strategic-plan>

Maturity, M.W. (no date) *[No title]*. Available at: <https://shekinah.co.uk/>

PHOEBE ENGLISH (no date) *PHOEBE ENGLISH*. Available at: <https://www.phoebeenglish.com/>

Taylor, A., Nelson, J., O'Donnell, S., Davies, E. and Hillary, J. (2022). *The Skills Imperative 2035: what does the literature tell us about essential skills most needed for work?* Slough: NFER.

Trevi. *About Trevi* (2020) Available at: <https://trevi.org.uk/about-trevi/>

ARTICLE PUBLISHED AT

<https://heprofessional.co.uk/premium/a-new-approach-to-graduate-employability-skills-creative-education-for-a-changing-world?rq=tim%20gundry>

Gundry, T. et al. (2024) *A New Approach to Graduate Employability Skills: Creative Education for a Changing World*, *HE Professional*. Available at: <https://heprofessional.co.uk/premium/a-new-approach-to-graduate-employability-skills-creative-education-for-a-changing-world>