

ABSTRACT

"Use your own vision and mentality in order to form design decisions + Don't believe your professor" Annelys de Vet – (Kiosoglou & Frank, Ed. 2013., p 34).

The aim of the study was to evaluate and construct an explanation behind the currency that higher education degrees in design enjoy in Ireland. The Visual Communication (VC) design discipline at Bachelors (BA) level accounted for the greatest cohort of students leaving design HE in Ireland in the 1990s. This graphic design (GD/VC) domain, together with related programmes in design in digital media still account for the largest numbers of students in design at Higher Education (HE) in Ireland. The *Opportunities in Design; Strategies for Growth in the Irish Design Sector* report (1999,, p.p.5.1.c-d) by PricewaterhouseCoopers/Bradley, McGurk and more recently Harvey's *Irish Design Footprint: Economic Value and Characteristics* report for the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI, 2016 pp. vi-vii), outline the strategic economic value that design provides for the Irish economy from the VC and creative digital media domain.

This study has adopted the VC discipline to explore the design HE experience from the perspective of graduates of one undergraduate (UG) VC programme. It considers their early design career and the transition that they make from leaving their UG HE to the design industry and, in some cases, to their decision to return to take up Masters and PhD level programmes. The emphasis of the research study has been from the graduates' perspective. The academics and industry are referenced in two ways: the first by way of context setting, and the second providing a critical commentary on design education from their perspectives.

The research questions are: 1. What type of employment does the graduate designer secure after undertaking an MA or PhD?; 2. What is the current employment status for graduates from UG and PG degrees in terms of, for example gender roles, work conditions, salary?; 3. What is the relationship between the different stakeholders, and 4. Which of the stakeholders, e.g., HEI design, design industry or graduate designer benefits the most from an MA or PhD?

The methodology employed three case studies, which represented the three different stakeholders. This qualitative approach involved 20 semi-structured interviews with graduates. The study therefore had a solid representation of participants in relevant categories that had validity and reliability for the research findings. Secondary issues such as: i) HEI and industry jointly provided assessment, and ii) graduates' continuing professional development (CDP) demands have been referenced. Learning attributes for design inclusive of digital, blended learning, placements/internships have been identified from the research findings for curriculum inclusion and development.

In conclusion, the research has highlighted the main characteristics and distinctive qualities of the individual stakeholders and their inter-relationships. It has been possible to construct a profile of the Irish post UG student now armed with their VC design qualification, and to track their early progression into the design industry. The domain is in constant flux, with change in 'trends and technology' dictating a tension between the design industry and the HE education provision. The 'catch-up' situation in digital input has put pressure on training at HE causing it to be fluid in order to be in keeping with the design industry. The research study is timely as HE in all domains is in a process of transition in Ireland.