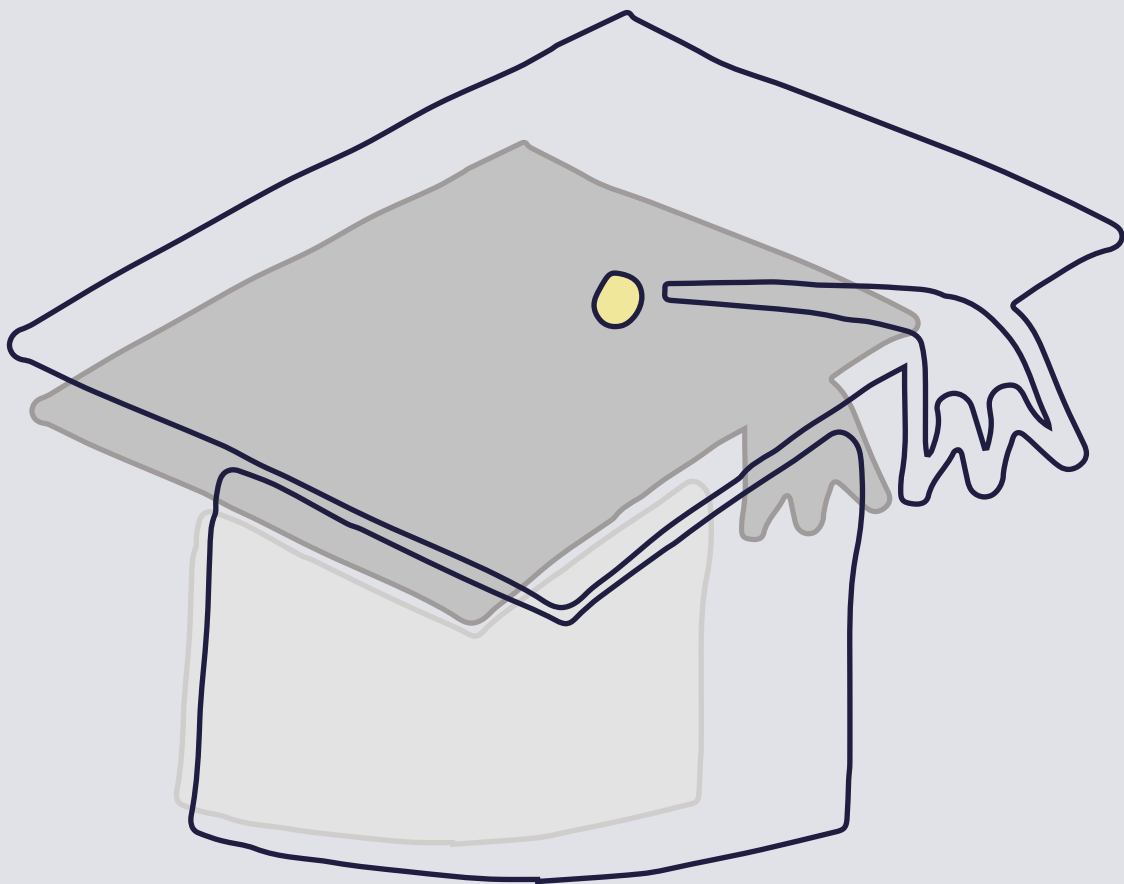
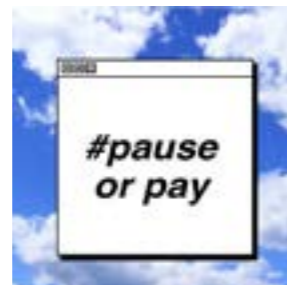


SHIFTING SANDS



GRADUATE PREPAREDNESS FOR A
POST-COVID CONTEMPORARY ART
WORLD

Shifting Sands is a collaboration between In Session and Pause or Pay UK in partnership with Creative Scotland and East Street Arts.



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○ WHO ARE WE?

Quinn Garrison & Ed Compson

Quinn Garrison is a practice-based doctoral candidate at The University of Edinburgh. Their research investigates the structural problems of privilege and inequality involved in subject formation and explores how a multi-agential curatorial approach can affect subjectivities within the context of alternative art schools. They use curatorial practice to create critical communities, working collaboratively with emerging creative practitioners, to examine the ways in which the infrastructure of the contemporary art world modulates their possible 'becomings'.

Quinn was also co-organiser of ¹In Session – a grassroots alternative education programme for early-career creative practitioners – which they

ran in collaboration with Rachael Simpson from 2018 to 2021. In Session, formerly known as GRADJOB, started at ²EMBASSY Gallery, an artist-run initiative in Edinburgh, in response to the lack of support, exploitation, and precarious working conditions experienced by graduates working in Scotland. In Session's vision was for an art sector founded on solidarity rather than competition, where collaborations are formed out of the desire for meaningful exchange, not economic necessity. Its goal was to provide creative practitioners with the support they needed to sustain and develop their practice eliminating barriers that prevent careers in the arts from being sustainable for most. Through peer-to-peer

learning and support networks our cohorts developed tools that helped them to demystify and navigate the contemporary art world, reflect on problematic structures that impact practice as an early-career practitioner and imagine alternatives models for the future of the sector.



Ed Compson is an artist, facilitator and the co-founder of ³Pause or Pay UK, a UK-wide cross-university action group led by students that emerged as a response to the disruption of studio-based learning by the COVID-19 pandemic. The group engaged thousands of art students across the country by conducting a nationwide campaign that highlighted and advocated for issues faced by studio-based learners at this time. Our work took the form of negotiating student access to studio space and workshops, in addition to helping them understand their legal rights in relation to the crisis. Pause or Pay UK supported graduates going into a depleted creative sector by achieving concrete commitments from a number of higher education institutions, which granted students access to facilities as well as helping hundreds of students and graduates receive compensation for their disrupted studies.

Ed was a committee member of EMBASSY Gallery from 2016 to 2018. Throughout his tenure he took the role of both chairperson and accountant, and played a key role in establishing closer links between EMBASSY and Edinburgh College of Art as a way to create better relations between University students and the artistic institutions in their local arts ecosystem. During this time he was also heavily involved in early discussions between Scottish ARIs about the precarious nature of such institutions and alternative funding models for them. This work contributed to the shaping of Creative Scotland's recent pilot programme which explored the best way to sustain artist-run activity in Scotland.



0 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In November 2021 we were commissioned by East Street Arts to conduct research into how well fine art Undergraduate courses in England prepare graduates for work in the contemporary art sector as part of their Guild sector support programme. Our own experience as fine art graduates trying to break into the sector, as well as our extensive work with graduates over the last seven years had already given us an awareness of the challenges faced by early-career creative practitioners in general and the multiple and intersecting barriers to entry experienced by those with marginalised identities. Despite their resourcefulness, passion and resilience, the graduates we worked with frequently expressed feelings ranging from bewilderment, isolation and desperation to exhaustion and resignation in their first year post-graduation and felt that their university course had not prepared them for working in the sector.

We were aware of reports such as ⁴a-n's *The Lay of the Land: current approaches to professional practice in visual and applied arts BA courses* (2013) and ⁵Q-Art's *PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: 20 QUESTIONS – Interviews with UK undergraduate Fine Art staff exploring how students are prepared for life after art school* (2016), both of which focused on the design and delivery of professional practice from the perspective of academic staff and gave us some insight into its contested role within fine art undergraduate courses. ⁶Creative Scotland's *Understanding Diversity in the Arts Survey Summary Report* (2017) and the ⁷Scottish Visual Art *Demographics Report* (2018) produced by Scottish Contemporary Art Network along with ⁸Arts Council England's *Livelihoods of Visual Artists: Literature and Data Review* (2018) also contributed to our understanding of the barriers faced by many early-career artists; however we identified a gap in terms of research that focused specifically on graduate experience of both undergraduate study and working in the sector.

⁴ Sarah Rowles and a-n The Artists Information Company. 2013. *The lay of the land: current approaches to professional practice in visual and applied arts BA courses*. (Accessed: 14/11/2021)

⁵ Q-Art. 2016. *PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: 20 QUESTIONS – Interviews with UK undergraduate Fine Art staff exploring how students are prepared for life after art school*. (Accessed: 14/11/2021)

⁶ Creative Scotland. 2016. *Understanding Diversity in the Arts Survey Summary Report*. (Accessed: 17/03/2022)

We had also witnessed first-hand how the effects of COVID-19 and the measures taken to combat the pandemic had affected graduates, Ed through his own experience of graduating during 2020 and working with fellow graduates through Pause or Pay UK's nationwide campaign, and Quinn from the experience of organising and facilitating In Session's 2021 programme. We saw clearly that COVID-19 was affecting specific groups differently depending on existing inequalities and exclusion mechanisms in the sector which we felt made carrying out this research even more vital. These observations were substantiated by ⁹Contemporary Visual Arts Network's *Impact of the Pandemic on the Livelihood of Visual Arts Workers* (2021).

Many of these concerns were shared by East Street Arts who had noticed many deficits in graduates' knowledge and skill sets whilst working with early-career artists in Leeds. We were also aware of Creative Scotland's work with, and research into ARLs via their pilot programme, which we took part in whilst serving as co-directors on the EMBASSY Gallery committee in 2019. This scheme was prompted by ¹⁰SCAN's *Mapping the Visual Arts in Scotland* (2015) report which found ARLs to be of central importance in the development of creative practice and thus highly valued in the sector. The grassroots nature of ARLs means that they tend to be founded and run predominantly by graduates/early-career artists, making research into the challenges faced by graduates vital for the sustainability of these spaces. We therefore proposed Shifting Sands as a UK-wide research collaboration between In Session and Pause or Pay UK in partnership with East Street Arts and Creative Scotland.

The project focuses on the experiences of 2020 fine art graduates from both Scotland and England in order to gain a better understanding of the barriers they face in their first 12 to 18 months post-graduation whilst attempting to gain entry to, and establish a career in, the contemporary art sector. To reflect East Street Arts' goal of creating a fairer sector for local artists and their neighbours, we chose to limit our English sample to graduates from the Yorkshire and the Humber region in order to identify the specific challenges faced by these graduates.

⁷ Scottish Contemporary Art Network. 2018. *Scottish Visual Art Demographics Report*. (Accessed: 17/03/2022)

⁸ Arts Council England. 2018. *Livelihoods of Visual Artists: Literature and Data Review*. (Accessed: 05/05/2023)

⁹ Contemporary Visual Arts Network. 2021. *Impact of the Pandemic on the Livelihood of Visual Arts Workers*. (Accessed: 12/05/2023)

¹⁰ Scottish Contemporary Art Network. 2015. *Mapping the Visual Arts in Scotland*. (Accessed: 12/05/2023)

○ KEY FINDINGS

Summary

Although our data showed that the barriers faced by graduates in their first year post-graduation are multiple and intersecting, they can be grouped into roughly four main categories: lack of knowledge, lack of skills, lack of experience and lack of networks.

It is clear from our four key findings that the structural inequality embedded within our culture is reflected and reproduced in both the higher education and further education (HE/FE) systems and the contemporary art sector through inadequate student support and guidance, unequal distribution of information and opportunities, unpaid and low paid work, short-term contracts and funding allocation. The data also reveals the toll that the current political, social and economic climate is taking on early-career artists, particularly those from marginalised groups.

It was evident from our graduate testimonies that they experienced the sector as elitist, exclusionary and exploitative and that this contributed greatly to their struggle to sustain a creative practice after graduation. Ultimately we found that these hostile conditions forced many to stop practising and withdraw from the sector entirely thus reinforcing its white, non-disabled and middle class predominance. The data also shows that the likelihood of, and extent to which, a graduate's professional development is negatively affected by any one of these factors is largely dependent on their socio-economic background, geographic location, caring responsibilities, disability, gender, race and/or sexual orientation. The impact of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis is prominent in the data, contributing to the financial hardship already experienced by many working in the sector.

Lack of knowledge

Our data showed that how and when professional practice is delivered has as much to do with how likely students are to internalise it as what is included in modules. It is also clear that students lack a basic awareness of how the art world works and how they can participate in it after graduating. The reluctance of tutors to discuss finances is leaving students at a loss as to how to support themselves post-graduation, leading many working-class graduates or those with caring responsibilities to discount working in the sector as a viable option. Most graduates we interviewed wanted a meaningful job in the sector but did not know they could apply their skills. Those who received mentorship from local artists/arts workers found this hugely beneficial for their professional development.

Lack of skills

Many students were disappointed not to have the opportunity to improve their technical skills. The main barriers to skills development in this area were high demand for workshops, staff shortages and the attitudes of technicians. All interviewees reported having a specific professional practice module built into their course, although the content varied greatly between institutions. Most graduates felt that they did not learn the professional practice skills whilst studying that they needed post-graduation. They reported that the format of their professional practice module did not offer the opportunity for individual feedback and that the information provided was not comprehensive.

As a consequence, many interviewees struggled to obtain funding post-graduation because they lacked the skills to write successful funding applications. This was particularly challenging for those with dyslexia and for whom English was a second language. Interviewees also flagged application labour as contributing to burnout, disillusionment and reduced confidence in their abilities.

Lack of Experience

Most graduates reported that opportunities for professional development whilst studying were extracurricular and for the most part unpaid. This meant that students who could not afford to work for free and those with caring responsibilities could not take advantage of them. Graduates felt that information about opportunities was not equally distributed leaving marginalised students at a disadvantage.

Interviewees felt that experience in the sector was essential due to fierce competition for opportunities post-graduation. Those in major cities described an oversaturated job market, whilst those outside major cities found it difficult to secure opportunities in their local area. It is clear that the current system pits early-career artists against each other and privileges those with prior experience and existing cultural capital, contributing to elitism within the sector. Our findings show that placements with local arts organisations can develop students' awareness, provide them with crucial in-situ hands-on experience and help them develop the skills they need to work in the sector.

Lack of Network

Our findings emphasise the importance of creative community for sustaining practice after graduation. They also show that most students feel disconnected from their local art scene whilst studying and leave art school with no networks outside the student body. In addition, due to COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis many graduates have been forced to move away from the town/city they studied in, leading to a lack of connections with other artists/art workers in their local community.

Graduates whose HE/FE worked in partnership with organisations and businesses reported that this helped them establish connections and gain experience whilst studying which led to future employment. Interviewees found talks from local artists and recent graduates, whilst studying, more beneficial than 'big names' and some were able to maintain these

connections after graduating. Our data also highlighted artist-run initiatives (ARIs) as a vital source of graduate opportunities, networks and skill sharing. However, graduates working in Scotland pointed to the voluntary nature of ARIs as a barrier for working-class people.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

In the context of fine art higher education, the preparation for life after art school is commonly referred to as professional practice. The inclusion of professional practice in fine art undergraduate courses is highly contested, often polarising university staff within the same institution. There are many reasons for resistance, including fears about the professionalisation and marketisation of the visual arts, the institutionalisation of the art school, the myth of innate artistic genius (the legacy of which is deeply embedded within and continues to inform pedagogical paradigms in art education) and concerns around the privatisation and instrumentalisation of higher education more generally.

On the other hand, the current political, social and economic climate is extremely hostile for artists. This is especially the case for early-career artists who, faced with elitism, exploitation, precarity, financial hardship and inequality in the sector struggle to sustain a creative practice after graduation. Decades of austerity policies initiated by the successive Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition governments in office from 2010 until the present day, have led to a hollowing out of the UK benefits system and significant funding cuts for the arts. This has in turn led to fierce competition, job insecurity, low pay and lack of individual funding for artists and art workers. This, combined with the impact of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis has made continuing to work in the visual arts unsustainable for a growing number of graduates. Increasingly, only those with a financial safety net can afford to pursue a career in the sector leading to a workforce that is overwhelmingly white, non-disabled and middle class.

A consideration of how well fine art undergraduate courses prepare students for work in the contemporary art sector post-graduation inevitably raised the question of whether an art degree should be, or is indeed capable of, preparing graduates for work in the sector. What is the purpose of an education in fine art now and what is the relationship of the fine art degree to the neoliberal university? These questions necessitate a brief overview of the professionalisation of visual arts practice in UK art schools and the political ideologies, government agendas and policies, as well as changing pedagogical paradigms that have and continue to shape it.

Many overlapping factors have contributed to the professionalisation, and interconnected institutionalisation, of UK art schools. The first government art schools: Edinburgh's School of Art and Design in 1760, London's Royal Academy in 1768, and later, in 1837, the Government School of Design, today known as the Royal College of Art (RCA), were in fact established to address a deficit in skilled British designers in order to compete with European manufacturing industries. These art schools were an accessible alternative to attending university for many working-class people due to state funding, relatively low or informal entry requirements and their links to manufacturing industries. The *Coldstream Reports* of 1960 and 1970, which introduced reforms that aligned fine art education with other disciplines of the university and brought in higher entry requirements, played a significant role in academicising fine art courses and the historical professionalising of fine art pedagogies.

Neoliberalism became the overarching political ideology of UK governments during the 1970s which initiated the privatisation, deregulation, financialisation and globalisation of the public sector. This ideology, continued under successive governments, has, over the last 40 years imposed the values, structures and processes of private sector management upon the UK public sector, including higher education. In addition, in 1999, the Bologna Declaration standardised EU member's higher education policies and practices into a three-cycle system of BA, MA, and Doctorate programs. Signatories, including the UK, agreed to adopt a system of comparable degrees. This was part of a government strategy to place higher education in the service of economic growth and global competitiveness, in line with neoliberal aims.

In 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act was implemented which condensed English polytechnics into universities, diminishing the number of independent art schools as they became colleges or departments of universities. In Scotland, five existing degree-awarding institutions became universities as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act. These were Abertay, Glasgow Caledonian, Napier, Paisley and Robert Gordon. In 2001 the University of the Highlands and Islands was created by a federation of 13 colleges and research institutions in the Highlands and Islands.

In 1998 the New Labour government introduced tuition fees of £1,000 which have continued to rise to £9,250 in England, coinciding with a reduction in maintenance grants. This sharp increase in the cost of higher education along with the academicising of fine art degrees and the absorption of art schools by the university is reflected in the class profile of students, with decreased attendance of working-class students, particularly in Russell Group universities. After devolution, in 1999 the Scottish Parliament gained legislative control over all education matters. This made it possible for them to abolish student tuition fees, instead retaining a system of means-tested student grants.



Also notable is the introduction of the UK government employability agendas in 1999/2002. These emphasised the development of employability skills and attributes to ensure work-ready graduates that would be more likely to repay student debt. In 2021, the Conservatives reformed the government's funding stream to higher education in England, by cutting arts subjects by 50% and redirecting that money to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. These factors have increased pressure on arts courses to deliver 'employable graduates' in order to legitimise government spending on fine art courses, which are often costly to deliver, placing unrealistic expectations and transactional values on arts education, students, and teachers.



Image Source: <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-how-students-have-been-misled-and-lied-to-for-20-years>

Professional practice in UK fine art undergraduate courses, is delivered through both embedded and/or discrete professional practice modules which vary depending on institutional ethos and pedagogical approaches of staff. For many post-1992 universities, vocationally-relevant education and training are part of their history, and employability is their primary aim. For some pre-1992 universities, employability has not yet supplanted

research as their main concern. This is particularly true of Russell Group HEIs whose global reputation and revenue streams are primarily based on their standing as research intensive institutions.

There is much debate over whether professional skill sets for artists exist and can be agreed upon. This is fundamentally tied up with the myth of the artistic genius, which is deeply embedded in fine art education and perpetuates the idea that the success of an artist is based on their natural creative talent, eclipsing art's artisanal roots and the unequal access to training, resources, opportunities and networks that develop artistic practice.

Whilst many advocacy reports consider the teaching of various practical skills a necessary component of a fine art education, including networking, preparing CVs, pricing work, and filling out HMRC self-assessment forms, some art schools instead choose to embed an entrepreneurial ideology into their brand identities and pedagogies rather than offering career and professional sustainability advice or teaching these skills. This entrepreneurial ethos encourages attitudes and forms of behaviour thought likely to advantage the individual within established, competitive market conditions.



METHODOLOGY



In January 2022 we launched a marketing campaign calling for research participants and began phase one of our interview process. We started with a small set of interviews which helped shape our initial lines of enquiry. Our interview guide included 22 questions (see Appendix 1) and employed a loosely structured but flexible interview technique which enabled us to be responsive, following the lead of participants. The second round of interviewees were then chosen, using purposive sampling, based on any gaps in the data.

Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews meant we were able to incorporate information on a substantial number of variables which allowed us to analyse emerging patterns of correlations, helping us to determine what mechanisms were operating in which contexts. This method enabled us to develop a rich data set which took into account the multiple and intersecting barriers to entry into the contemporary art Sector. This enquiry is based on that data, collected between March and September 2022.

A total of 46 graduates – 33 graduates from five HEIs and two FEIs across Scotland and 13 students from six HEIs across the Yorkshire and the Humber region were interviewed as part of *Shifting Sands*. All students we interviewed either graduated or were due to graduate in 2020 but dropped out before completing their degree. Student demographics were measured through equality, diversity and inclusion monitoring forms, the data from which we have included (see Appendix 2 and 3). Interviews were approximately one hour in duration and all participants were paid for their involvement in the study.

¹¹ [Scottish Contemporary Art Network. 2018. Scottish Visual Art Demographics Report. Scottish Contemporary Art Network. 2018. Scottish Visual Art Demographics Report. \(Accessed: 17/03/2022\)](#)

¹² [Arts Council England. 2018. Livelihoods of Visual Artists: Literature and Data Review. \(Accessed: 05/05/2023\)](#)



LIMITATIONS

This study does not claim to provide a conclusive understanding of graduate experience, not least due to our relatively small sample size. Although the population of the Yorkshire and the Humber region is similar to Scotland, with more HE/FE institutions offering fine art Undergraduate courses in the Yorkshire and the Humber region in comparison to Scotland, our English sample is significantly smaller. This is in part, likely due to the make-up of In Session's social media following which is primarily composed of graduates from Scottish art schools.

Despite our best efforts to find and select participants from a broad range of HE/FE institutions and fine art courses within the Yorkshire and the Humber region and throughout Scotland there are gaps in our data set, with some courses and institutions overrepresented and some underrepresented or missing altogether. Similarly, the graduates from particular demographics are overrepresented and others underrepresented when compared with ¹¹SCAN's *Scottish Visual Art Demographics Report* (2018) and ¹²Arts Council England's *Livelihoods of Visual Artists: Literature and Data Review* (2018) which summarise available data on the demographics of the Scottish and English visual art sectors respectively. Although, to our knowledge, this is the most recent sectoral data available, there has been a lack of research into the involvement of some demographics in the visual arts, particularly transgender and muslim populations and those from working class backgrounds. Therefore our ability to gauge how accurately our study represents these groups is limited.

The fact that this study focuses on 2020 graduates makes this data set somewhat unique as students' experience of their final year of art school was significantly disrupted due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The effects of the pandemic also undoubtedly impacted their first 12 to 18 months after graduation to a degree that will not be experienced by future graduates.

○ FINDINGS

Regardless of these limitations, our findings did highlight common experiences of dissatisfaction with professional practice provision in UK art schools. Our data also sheds light on the barriers faced by graduates trying to break into the sector today, offering an insight into the inequalities in the UK contemporary art sector. Although our data showed that the barriers faced by graduates in their first year post-graduation are multiple and intersecting, they can be grouped into roughly four main categories: lack of knowledge, lack of skills, lack of experience and lack of networks. The remainder of this report will focus on each of these categories in more depth after first providing a breakdown of the broad range of creative practices reported by participants, their motivations for studying fine art at HE/FE level and an overview of their general experience of their undergraduate course.

CREATIVE PRACTICE ○

Graduates from institutions in the Yorkshire and the Humber region came from a wide range of courses: Fine Art at Leeds Arts University; Fine Art and Photography at Sheffield Hallam University; Fine Art with Contemporary Cultural Theory, Fine Art with History of Art and Fine Art at The University of Leeds; Photography at The University of Huddersfield; Fine Art at York St John University and Fine Art at Hull School of Art and Design.

Graduates from Scottish institutions also came from a wide range of courses: Sculpture and Environmental Art, Fine Art Photography and Painting and Printmaking at The Glasgow School of Art; Sculpture, Painting, Photography and Intermedia at Edinburgh College of Art; Contemporary Art Practice, Fine Art and Painting at Gray's School of Art; Contemporary Art Practice at City of Glasgow College; Fine Art and Art and Philosophy at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design; Art

and Design at Forth Valley College and Fine Art at the University of the Highlands and Islands' Moray and Shetland campuses.

41% of those interviewed described their practice as multidisciplinary regardless of whether they had studied on an interdisciplinary course or chosen a specific discipline, with graduates making work which incorporated a broad range of practices including performance, film, photography, sculpture, painting, installation, illustration, sound, moving image, architecture, writing, socially engaged practice and ceramics. 13% identified themselves as painters, 7% as photographers and 10% described their practice as purely sculptural. The remainder of interviewees situated their practice within performance, ceramics and digital art. Many of those interviewed reported that their creative practice had multiple strands and also considered curation and facilitation part of their practice. 10% no longer saw themselves as having a creative practice but were pursuing careers as writers, researchers, event organisers, fundraisers, teachers or conservators.

It is evident from these descriptions that the definition of practice is highly subjective and context dependent with some activities included under the banner of creative practice by certain individuals and not others. It is also common for graduates to have multiple strands to their practice, reflecting the ethos of many of the art institutions where they studied and the trend towards a more expanded and interdisciplinary approach to contemporary art practice in the sector more generally. However, this multifaceted approach to practice also revealed the pressure to be highly adaptable in response to lack of opportunities, fair pay and precarity.

'We need to do a little bit of everything to even get our noses into the artist's pool'



WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO STUDY ART IN UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE?

Individuals gave multiple reasons when asked what influenced their decision to study art at HE/FE level. 63% of interviewees said their reason for choosing to study art came from a love of art that began in childhood, with 28% citing natural talent/ability as a motivating factor.

'Art's just always been my first sort of love... It wasn't really a question, I was just following my heart.'

'It's just something I naturally go towards'

Many interviewees commented that art was the only subject that they enjoyed at high school with some choosing to study at FE/HE level to develop their practice. Many said that art was the only subject they performed well in during school with some disclosing that they left secondary education with few Highers/A-levels. 9% cited Dyslexia as a contributing factor, explaining that they found it easier to communicate visually and describing themselves as a 'hands on person'.

Schools and colleges played a significant role in students' decisions to continue their studies. 20% of those interviewed said they were encouraged to study a degree in art by their teachers or college lecturers whilst 4% cited pressure from school as a factor that influenced their decision to go to university. Many saw further study as the 'natural next step', this was the case regardless of socio-economic background with 9% of Scottish students entering university through a widening participation programme such as Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) or Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP).

This is likely in part due to the fact that Scottish students are entitled to free tuition at Scottish FE/HE institutions, making higher education more accessible to working-class students. 6% of Scottish graduates said they chose to study at a Scottish institution because there were no tuition fees, with one commenting that they would have liked to study in London but could not afford to pay fees. ¹³*The Fair Access to Higher Education: progress and challenges annual report (2020)*, which demonstrates the Scottish Government's targets for fair access to universities and colleges also shows an increase of 16% in full-time first-degree Scottish domiciled entrants to higher education institutions in Scotland from the 20% most deprived communities as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) with 11% entrants studying fine art.

Another common reason given for choosing to study art was the freedom to explore and communicate ideas. Interestingly, graduates who had completed previous study and were already working in different fields commented that they were drawn to studying art as a way to strengthen their existing work and to communicate ideas to new audiences in different ways. Mature students also cited the desire for a career change and the therapeutic benefits of art as reasons for studying.

Family was also a big contributing factor in the decision making process. 11% reported that they chose to study art at college/university because their parents had been to art school or because they had family members who worked in the creative industries.

¹³ Scott, P. 2020. *The Fair Access to Higher Education: progress and challenges annual report*. (Accessed: 14/05/2023)

'It's in the blood'

'Following the stream that I was already swimming'

13% however chose to study for a degree in art despite being discouraged from applying by family members. Some reported that they had to convince their parents to let them go to art school.

'Everyone around me was trying to put me off it, telling me there wouldn't be any work to get after it and there wasn't much point in devoting three or four years to it. Everyone just said just do it as a hobby and study something more sensible.'

'My mum was like, maybe you should get a real job now.'

These comments chime with the lack of value given to art in our culture as well as speaking to very real concerns parents have about the availability of graduate employment and the ability of art graduates to support themselves financially.

Again the reasons for choosing particular courses were varied with the biggest consideration being pedagogical. 15% of graduates said the reason for choosing their particular course was that it offered the freedom to work in an interdisciplinary way, however 4% chose their course because it specialised in a particular medium – this tended to be the case with those working in painting or sculpture.

Location was a major factor in determining which institution graduates chose to study at. 13% chose to study at the HE/FE institution that was closest to them. This was the reason most cited by those outside the central belt and those with caring responsibilities.

'I wouldn't have been able to do a course if it wasn't local'

'Because I had kids, as much as I would have loved to have gone to Glasgow School of Art, I didn't really have that option'

University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) graduates with caring responsibilities also highlighted the course structure as a deciding factor. UHI is the only HE/FE institution in Scotland to offer students the option of studying for their BA part time as well as remotely, providing a unique situation which accommodated the specific needs of these students and made it possible for them to continue their education.

'I wouldn't have been able to do the standard full time undergraduate course in another city'

17% of those interviewed however, chose their university because they wanted to move out of the family home or wanted the experience of living in a new city, with 20% choosing to study at their university because they liked the city where it was based. This was particularly true of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Leeds – Edinburgh based on architecture and natural beauty, Glasgow mainly due to culture and the perception of a thriving art scene, and Leeds because of the impression of a lively student culture. One international student from the EU commented that they chose to study in the UK due to the quality of the education system and that Scotland was one of the only countries where it was possible to obtain a visa to both work and study prior to Brexit.

17% of interviewees chose their institution based on the university's reputation; this was particularly true of those who studied at The University of Leeds and international students coming to study on the painting course at Gray's. One student chose to study at City of Glasgow College on the recommendation of a friend because they offered a business module which, whilst studying, was cut from the programme.

Many graduates chose their institution based on their experience of the open day with 15% citing its welcoming atmosphere and 15% based on the approachability and friendliness of the tutors.

EXPERIENCE OF THE COURSE

Most students entered into their course with no expectations and when asked about their experience of their course overall, reported a positive experience whilst studying with many commenting that it expanded their awareness of what art could be, pushed them outside of their comfort zone and allowed them to develop confidence in their practice. However on reflection at the time of interview (12 to 18 months post-graduation) many felt that it could have done more to prepare them for work.

'Because I was so young I didn't really know what to expect and I didn't know anybody that was in other surrounding art schools... it's only kind of upon reflection that I really feel like it is lacking in a lot of things'

'Now I want things but it's too late'

Graduates from Glasgow School of Art (GSA) and Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) were the most likely to say that they knew what to expect from the course, with some reporting that they were advised by school or college to be prepared for a lack of contact time and support from tutors.

'I think that was one thing that I was aware of, that you really had to demand your teaching in Edinburgh'

Graduates from GSA were also prepared for a course without much structure which some found attractive as they felt it would give them the freedom to practise on their own terms.

'It was that kind of blank canvas feeling which I liked'

However whilst studying, students from most institutions found the lack of structure difficult. Those who had come straight from school struggled the most with the openness of briefs and lack of timetabled workshops.

'I didn't do a foundation course I just went straight from sixth form to university and whether that was a good thing or not I think probably struggled a bit in my first year because it was very open.'

Disabled students from our English sample gave accounts of using the unstructured nature of the course to accommodate their needs. Some explained that the lack of contact time allowed them to take a more flexible approach, working from home or taking time off when their health issues prevented them from going into university.

'There was a lot of weeks where we had nothing in our calendars, nothing that we had to be attending or anything.'

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the key findings from our study is that graduates lack a general awareness of how the art world functions – the roles involved in the production, distribution and evaluation of contemporary art and how the interplay between entities such as public and private museums, galleries, art fairs, auction houses, funding bodies, universities and artists themselves create and shape the sector.

'I remember being very much like what is funding? I didn't really understand and I think if I had understood the way that the art world works and... like that obviously is so important, now I apply for funding all the time'

'I think the other thing is just being a bit more explicit during our college about the different games that are going on, you know, I think as an undergrad, you have no sense of that at all and it's only when you leave and you look at different kinds of art from the outside that you just realise yes, there's so many different levels of the of the commercial art world and different niches in different places.'

Many of the graduates we interviewed started their undergraduate course with a very limited understanding of the sector, and although many applied with the view to becoming a professional artist, they did not know what this would involve and had little awareness of different careers in the sector. Those who had less exposure to art growing up or who did not have any family or friends working in the arts were at a particular disadvantage. Some potential careers mentioned by students who applied to art school with a particular career goal in mind other than becoming a professional artist were teachers or art therapists.

'I wasn't really sure if I was going to go back after each year. I think that was all to do with not having found even a practice that kind of felt like my own that I'd feel confident enough in to then want to do after I graduated or anything'

'I think when I was studying I was a bit like what am I going to do when I leave, what's going to happen?'

'I couldn't really imagine what I could do with my skills'

'Like what are the things you actually need to know? And what are the things that you might be worried about, but you don't need to worry about, you know? Just a bit of that because like, there wasn't really any of that.'

'I still don't know what [professional practice] means... if I don't know the answer that means there's something awfully wrong'

'I did still want to believe that I could be a practicing artist. It's just I didn't really know how that would actually work.'

Two of the GSA students we interviewed said they had considered dropping out due to the lack of career support offered by the university.

'It was mainly the lack of direction and not knowing why I was doing it or what I wanted to do with it afterwards and just kind of like did I make a horrible choice is there any point in spending 2 or 3 more years doing this if I'm already not sure why I'm doing it'

Graduates reported a lack of transparency from tutors and visiting artists about how to break into the sector.

'I do feel like some of them were slightly holding back. There's a lot of stuff that I kind of like found out after or just like little extra things, and I don't know why that is like because a lot of the artists are teaching or were talking they know, they know more than they were letting on.'

'There was not really any answer, which I found frustrating because then it lead me to think is everybody keeping this secret from each other because it's competitive? It's almost as if they don't want all that information out there, then that would mean less competition for them'

Interviewees said that their course did not discuss alternative careers in the sector either, and some reported a general attitude of disdain towards those who expressed an interest in roles other than that of a professional artist.

'There wasn't really any identifiable gateways into career paths'

'It was like either you go on to do a masters or... I didn't really know what the other options were for working in the arts'

'They teach you to be an artist and that's it, like I remember someone went off to go and be a teacher and it was like maybe not looked down upon but sort of in that sense. They were like why are they going off to be a teacher you should be here for the art!'

Because of this lack of basic contextual understanding students were unable to imagine how their practice could exist within the sector and how they could participate in it.

The data revealed a disconnect between studio work and professional practice, experienced by students in both course design and delivery. Interviewees described their course as very project focused, centring around developing practice and producing work.

'Not to do with career to be honest that wasn't really discussed. I got support for each project I was working on at the time but certainly like the bigger picture of where I could take this after I graduate or anything like that wasn't discussed.'

'Noone ever asked me at all what I wanted to do afterwards. I think they were very focused on producing the art whilst you were there'

'I learned skills there but nothing applicable to outside of college'

They reported that their course did not place much emphasis on professional practice and that tutors did not seem to value it. Some graduates said the fact that their professional practice module was not graded reinforced their assumption that it was unimportant.

'It felt like they were just ticking a box'

'If it had been set up in a way that was like this is going to help you, this is essential and this is the reality of it not just you need to do this it's a pass or fail I think that was the main issue'

'Because it wasn't graded 'I was like oh I don't need it''

GSA students stated that they were assessed on external opportunities as part of their professional practice module but received no guidance from tutors on how to find opportunities or approach organisations and were expected to participate in these out with their timetabled curriculum. One participant described being reprimanded by their tutor for engaging in professional development during studio time and had to request time off work in order to participate in the external opportunities required to pass the course.

Some reported that they were actively discouraged from asking about careers and told 'that's not something we talk about in art school'. Graduates felt that their tutors encouraged them to continue their creative practice after graduating but reported that they did not offer any insight into the practicalities of working as a professional artist. Consequently, students did not understand the relevance of their professional practice modules and how vital these skills were for establishing and sustaining a career in the arts after graduation. This meant they were reluctant to devote time to learning skills such as writing funding applications, networking, negotiating contracts, or promotion which they saw as irrelevant.

Most found that the careers service at their institution did not have an awareness of how to begin a career in the arts either and therefore could not advise them.

'The university did have a careers adviser but it was... they couldn't really advise you in an art career I don't think, I think they were sort of generalist, not a specialist.'

'It was kind of like we were at career talks or we had people from the wider uni come and talk to us. And it would be kinda like and as artists, here's what you can do. And it was a bullet point list of like stuff that felt a little bit unclear or not exactly what we've been taught or told.'

Some graduates said they got the impression that making money from their practice was viewed as selling out by tutors, reporting that they were told not to discuss money when they asked how to price their work. Even those who wanted to work as professional artists felt it was unrealistic to imagine that this would be their sole source of income and planned to support their practice through working in addition to making art.

'Its weird I don't really know what was expected of us, like what they expected us to do – but maybe what I've done is what they expected us to do but now I'm technically unemployed so... is that what they wanted me to do maybe? Yes.'

'Being realistic not every student is going to leave and have exhibitions lined up and residencies lined up. You need to be able to pay your bills somehow'

Most wanted a meaningful job where they could use their skills and engage with other creative people in the sector.

'I am a practising artist but a practising artist doesn't necessarily pay the bills so I need to have a job on the side of that but I want to also have a meaningful job rather than just a small retail job or something like that, y'know?'

'We were never really supported in a sense of leaving uni and getting a job that would be able to fund you creating and making work and I didn't want there to be such a divide between my art work and getting a job that would pay the bills. I wanted a job where I was in and involved whilst I could also make at the same time.'

'I've realised recently that I'd rather make money out of doing something creative than do a shit job'

The majority of interviewees stated that they had continued with their creative practice post-graduation. However, graduates were often working multiple jobs or long hours in order to support themselves and found they had a lack of time and energy for their creative practice.

'Often times I'm just too tired to actually make any progress on anything'

'I do hope one day I can just have one job just a wee 9-5 Monday to Friday. No one else romanticises it as much as I do but it would be nice to just have one thing'

'Sometimes you've got to be burnt out all the time and sort out multiple opportunities at once'

'What do you apply for on indeed? Artist? D'ya get what I mean?'

A significant number of interviewees were not working in the sector, with some reporting that they did not know what jobs they could apply their skills to.

Many reported experiencing financial hardship as a result of unemployment, low paid or unpaid jobs and lack of funding. This was exacerbated by the cost of living crisis and as a result many were either in debt or forced to live with family.

'We know that artists don't get paid... our wages aren't the same as if we were going into a different field. Hopefully when wages rise a little bit or cost of living comes down that might be a time when we can actually maybe move'

'I know people that, you know, were on Universal Credit and could afford to sustain themselves with that alone. And again, it kind of comes down to probably where you're living and who you can live with for that to support you'

Many highlighted the lack of stability and financial security created by short-term and zero-hour contracts as a barrier that made it harder to take up opportunities in the sector.

'So many jobs are 6 months and such long, what's happened to stability? Why haven't we got the funding to allow people to get jobs'

'I didn't want to leave a weekend job for a temporary weekend job... the job they were offering they didn't know when it was going to end. It could be in 2 months it could be a year, it could be 2 years... even though I would have loved the experience, I have to have money, income coming in somehow'

Those with caring responsibilities found this especially difficult.

'It's easier to take up opportunities when you're young and flexible and you don't have family caring commitments and things like that'

LACK OF SKILLS

Many students had hoped to be taught technical skills especially in first year in order to develop a foundational understanding of making processes, which they felt would give them a chance to develop a confidence and direction for their practice, and were disappointed not to receive this

'In terms of developing technical skills there was very little actually provided, so if you wanted to do something you just went off and you had to do it yourself and teach yourself how to do that'

'The course is a lot about like thinking and talking about art, which I did find interesting, but in terms of actually having skills to make the work to any degree, there was really nothing there in terms of that which was disappointing.'

'I think the one thing I was slightly disappointed about was not having a bit more structured content at the beginning to actually learn techniques.'

The exception to this seems to be those studying on painting courses.

'There was quite a lot of drawing skills, basic painting skills which has come in useful.'

However, students reported facing great difficulty when trying to attend workshops in other departments, therefore those outside painting were

generally not able to access these. Some commented that they wished they had been given the option to specialise in one thing and to hone their skills in particular processes, with many saying they left feeling like 'a jack of all trades, master of none'.

Interviewees told of many barriers to accessing their university/college facilities, with workshops in such high demand that slots were booked up weeks in advance. Students reported being met with frustration and unwillingness by technicians and had a sense that they were overworked. They also described a culture of misogyny and homophobia that discouraged them from using workshops and negatively impacted their ability to improve technical skills.

'It felt a bit intimidating to go down and like, talk to them and stuff sometimes.'

'I didn't go to the metal workshop much because the guy in there at the time was a bit scary.'

'I don't think I made a single thing in the wood workshop after my first year, I was like no I don't want to go. I didn't enjoy going it was... it was quite frightening.'

'They welcomed boys really easily into the workshops and the sort of female or quite feminine boy group are sort of kept on the periphery and weren't engaged with particularly well and it was sort of a constantly passive aggressive experience unless you spent a lot of time there.'

'It has happened to me a good few times where you've got this macho technician and they're just so condescending, there just bossing you around and they're... I can't put my finger on it, it's like they don't respect you as an artist.'

Lack of professional practice skills was also a significant barrier post-graduation. All interviewees reported having a specific professional practice module built into their course, although the content varied greatly between institutions. GSA students reported that professional practice was only incorporated after many repeated requests by students. Both English and Scottish graduates reported that their professional practice module was delivered in the form of school-wide lectures and that the information provided was not comprehensive.

'It didn't really amount to anything. It was just looking at websites, nothing substantial. I didn't really feel like a learning experience, it felt lacking'

'If the personal and professional development had been a more well-rounded course I would have been so interested because obviously I want to know how to be an artist'

'It didn't really tick any proper boxes, just half boxes'

'Professional skills was so generic that it didn't really help us develop ideas of what kind of jobs we could do'

Those who were graded on their professional practice did not receive specific feedback which they felt would have helped them to develop their skills.

'I could never actually figure out what they were actually looking for'

When asked what they felt was missing from their professional practice modules the most commonly cited topic was funding. Interviewees reported being warned that working as a professional artist would result in financial hardship but not receiving any advice about how to support themselves.

'I don't think I was necessarily prepared at all to go into the art sector really. All I knew, all I knew was that it was there was going to be... it was not going to lead to any money so if I wanted to do it, I would either have to stay at home or, you know, basically be skint my entire life.'

'I think the whole narrative was like yeah you're going to really struggle'

'I don't remember them being like oh this is how you can make money'

Many found this discouraging, especially working-class students who felt that this meant working as a professional artist was not an option for them.

'In one of the professional practice talks they were like someone who graduates from art is probably only going to make like £14000 a year and I was like that's not very motivating for people who are studying on this course'

'As university went along, I think also in terms of just learning what the art sort of landscape is like, I was prepared to work and do whatever it was to make ends meet while sort of setting your art on the backburner.'

'You were sort of taught to be like, yeah, you're going to have to work really hard for very little, very early on.'

Interviewees identified lack of funding as a major obstacle post-graduation. Many struggled with writing funding applications, particularly those with Dyslexia and for whom English was a second language.

'I find it so hard to write applications, I've got dyslexia... I can find opportunities great and I can have all this experience but it's how to say it in an attractive way to people which is difficult'

'Of course they're going to pick someone who's more clear and concise with writing than someone who has no clue on how to properly explain themselves.'

Graduates described the continual process of applying for funding and opportunities as laborious and demoralising. Some said that this left little time to actually make work and that the constant rejection had a negative effect on their mental health, making them question whether they wanted to continue trying to work in the sector.

'I just have to weigh up what's worth it, really because again, I've got to question, you know, for a small fee, maybe, and that's going to take the application process is so long and tedious and the likelihood of the outcome, and weighing up all that over y'know missing a day at work or a shift swap or something like that or yeah covering, in your hospitality day job, you know, that's definitely worth more probably than spending 90+ hours'

'Savage cycle of constantly applying to things and only getting 25% of them'

'So you're not maybe making, which feels odd when you're trying to say that you're going to, you're going to be making work that you want to make, but you've not made anything for three months because you've been doing applications for everything.'

Some said that they felt that it was not feasible for them to apply for funding due to the lack of financial security that applying for funding on a project to project basis created due to its short-term nature.

'I just found that there was more longer term funding with the business funding as opposed to arts funding which seems like a one off grant for a project or kind of bits here and there as opposed to like 18 months of consistent funding'

'I know there is funding to support your practice but it's so here and there I can't take that risk... it's too risky, how do I know when the next funding is coming in'

Other commonly cited topics were finding opportunities, application writing, sourcing exhibition spaces, exhibition making, pricing work and business skills.

'In terms of the really practical skills of actually finding money to be able to do this, I don't think we were really ever prepared for. Even things like sharing things like CPPs with us and all of that stuff are things that could've happened whilst we were there cause these are really big organisations for us to know that have a lot of opportunities going all the time.'

'At what point you have to register yourself as self-employed, at what, how the tax system works with self-employed people because you actually have to do your own taxes. Maybe some of the sort of how to manage your business kind of thing. Just a brief overview of like business management and managing your money kind of in a business sense.'

'I don't really remember them ever talking about that, it's quite, I realise now, quite an important part of being an artist initially is how to ask for funding. And yeah, some of the applications are quite complicated. And you just think, you know, I don't know if I'm doing the right thing or not and yeah I don't think they ever covered that, which was unfortunate.'

Graduates also emphasised the importance of soft skills such as networking, negotiating contracts and communicating with galleries. Working-class and Neurodivergent graduates felt that not learning these skills put them at a disadvantage.

'There was no introduction on how to liaise with art institutions and as someone who is like working class and I've never been... no one's ever been to university in my family. I don't really know how to engage in a lot of conversations with people or institutions regarding anything like this and I also feel that that holds me back a bit do you know what I mean? And if I applied to something, I don't feel I can have the best vernacular to engage with someone to then successfully get employment out of it'

'Soft skills are something that would make a difference between someone like me not knowing about the opportunities that exist because it's about soft skills the opportunities.'

Graduates also commented on the timing of their professional practice module with most saying that they had too much work to do in preparation for degree show in final year to focus on professional practice with many Scottish students suggesting third year as a better alternative.

'You're quite caught up in your own project at that time and it's quite difficult to kind of split yourself so many ways to be attending other things as well'

'By third year I think it would be really helpful to have a mentorship scheme'

'The final year is a total daze you're exhausted'



LACK OF EXPERIENCE



Difficulty securing employment in the sector and lack of opportunities were major barriers post-graduation. Many felt that their lack of experience put them at a disadvantage compared to other applicants.

'In terms of jobs in the arts I feel like it maybe has held me back a bit not having had any experience working for an arts organisation or in an arts setting really.'

'It's still alien to me... I'm frustrated because I feel like I should be further along.'

'I've heard that once you get your foot in the door if you do that for maybe like a couple of weeks or a month or something then they might recruit internally or they might ask you or advise you for jobs they've got going'

'I definitely didn't feel like I could jump straight into a job in the arts by any means after graduating I actually felt like I had no work experience in the arts at all besides a couple of lines on my CV to say that I'd been to GSA'

Students from York St John and LAU were the only interviewees who had an optional placement built into their course. This opportunity helped them get a clearer understanding of their career paths and was desirable to employers post-graduation, providing them with the experience they needed to secure a role in the sector.

'I actually really liked it there but I realised that being a curator was not necessarily what I wanted to do anymore'

Conversely, those who did not have the opportunity to take part in a placement as part of their course felt that this would have benefitted them.

'I think that would've helped me a lot with that kind of issue I had with the direction I wanted to go in, that would have helped hugely'

One GSA graduate, who had since gone on to study a Masters degree, commented that the placement this course offered with a local arts organisation gave them the experience they needed to secure their current role in the sector.

Most graduates reported that opportunities for professional development

'That's one of the most useful things I could've done, that's one of the best things I got out of the course... I think that's been an integral point in my career to get me the job I'm in just now'

whilst studying were extracurricular and for the most part unpaid, meaning that students who could not afford to work for free and those with caring responsibilities could not take advantage of them.

'At the time I wouldn't have had any time to do any opportunities because it was hard enough to juggle to get to college and work on time and sort my kids out without adding any extra on the top of it'

'Paying rent and eating comes before doing any professional practice'

'I think especially in the arts there's a lot of that oh it'll be good experience for you but it's not obviously that accessible if its unpaid'

The main channels for sourcing opportunities for professional development whilst studying were University/College emails, bulletin boards on campus, word of mouth and social media. The data shows that graduates felt

that information about opportunities was not equally distributed and that tutors favoured some students, making them aware of opportunities and providing them with support with applications. Those who could not be in the studio as much due to work, illness or caring responsibilities felt that this put them at a disadvantage as they missed out on opportunities for professional development being shared by tutors. Some also pointed out that the premium placed on social currency in the art world puts those with caring responsibilities as well as Neurodivergent and Non-binary people at a disadvantage, as student-led projects and collaborations tend to evolve out of peer bonding in social settings.

'You miss out on it because you need to make a dinner, you can't go for a drink after university or missing an opening exhibition because your kid is sick or you need to put your baby to sleep.'

'If you don't choose the lifestyle that they choose with drinking and out of hours partying then you could miss out'

'If you don't go to the tea party you're not included'

'Not every place is friendly to me to go to'

Interviewees who were unable to take part in these opportunities felt that this had a negative impact on their prospects post-graduation. In general, interviewees felt that graduating during COVID-19 meant there were fewer jobs available throughout the UK.

'Because of the climate of COVID I knew there wasn't going to be any jobs to apply for'

'Nothing was open, everything was furloughed. The last thing people were doing was employing people at this point in time, so it was like what am I going to do?'

Those living in Glasgow or London described a competitive and oversaturated job market. Whereas students living out with the central belt in Scotland and in smaller towns and cities in England felt there were a lack of opportunities in their local area.

'There was loads of jobs out there, I was applying for so many, but it was about every feedback was the same. It was kind of just like, oh yeah, you don't have enough experience.'

'It's that industry where you have to really be active or you're just not going to get enough skills, experience or notice for actually getting to these positions'

'For the younger folk or the folk who are just trying to get established I don't think there's so much available for them.'

'I feel like there needs to be more opportunity for graduates and not just one you know I've got one opportunity to do this, I want to have, you know maybe 20'

'In Shetland there's a lot of opportunities for carers and joinery but art isn't really one of them, that's just how it is'

Those who were able to take part in extracurricular professional development, be that participating in student-led shows or volunteering, found it helped them to get a clearer picture of the art world and their potential career paths. These graduates also said it helped them develop skills they found useful in their future careers, gain experience, build networks and improve their confidence.

'It made me really like this is possible and like if you make a name for yourself and if you are involved it will work out. So I think it was really reassuring for me and really good for my confidence'

Some also said that this led to future opportunities with the same organisation and that contacts they made there supported them with applications for other opportunities. Some of those who worked with other early-career artists or art students established connections that led to collaborative projects.

Interviewees from working class backgrounds drew attention to the masking of structural inequalities in the sector via the tokenism of working class artists. Others spoke of a sense of imposter syndrome whilst trying to work in the sector.

'While I don't think that necessarily affects me through application in terms of seeking work or opportunities, it can sometimes become a bit of a token if that makes sense.'

One artist working in London (the only person of colour from our English sample) gave an example of the racial discrimination they faced whilst working in the arts.

'When you think about the traditional white cube space it's just boring old men – they're not ready to accept us'

'It's not going to be easy you've got to be strong and thick skinned and believe in your talent. If you adamantly believe you deserve to be here no one can tell you otherwise'

0 LACK OF NETWORK

Our data shows that graduates who are not part of a creative network struggle to sustain their practice. Many felt that not having a community to share ideas and opportunities with and to offer mutual support was having a negative effect on their professional development.

'The more external opportunities there are and the more networks you've got kinda formal/informal you know I think a mix. You know that you've got sort of funded bodies that are really helping graduates to develop but you've also got little graduate groupings that are able to show work in different places'

'I need to find the community here, I don't really know where the artists in Manchester are... that's what they don't teach you at uni, that it's all about a community. Art is nothing without everyone working together, you can't just do it on your own'

'It really is having that network that you can sort of feed into and that there are opportunities coming out of that'

'I've learnt now it's not what you know, it's definitely not in the industry, 100 percent.'

Many graduates described feeling distinctly separate from their local art scene whilst studying. Most said that their University or College did not facilitate connections with local institutions or artists, which meant many left art school with no networks out with the student body.

'I didn't know about the art scene. I remember one of the tutors being like yeah there's an art scene in Leeds but it's really underground and you need to find it and I just remember thinking well can you just tell me where to look and it was all this very mysterious thing'

'I wasn't friends with anyone outside of university I wasn't friends with anyone from Leeds... maybe that's just because I'm an idiot but I don't think that was encouraged'

'I guess I never felt like part of a creative network in Glasgow or anything while I was at GSA. I felt very much like a student in the GSA bubble'

'There wasn't really a dedicated focus to the outside world. I think on the course it was mainly giving you the skills to go out into the outside world but in terms of the network once you were there it wasn't really built.'

'I sort of felt that we were in this bubble and once the bubble popped and we got our degree we were on our own.'

'That's kind of where the downfall was, those connections weren't made, we weren't pointed in the direction of these people who could give us opportunities as independent freelance artists. It was just oh you can do it now, go and do it, and yeah I can do it but I've got no money, you know I've got no space!'

However both Gray's and Sheffield Hallam worked in partnership with organisations and businesses, helping students establish connections and gain experience which lead to future employment within these organisations for some.

'They like to have students actively communicating with these organisations. They actively push people to network. Sometimes they like to take these people who are locally showing and do talks in Grays.'

'All the people who I think really gave us good advice were graduates from Sheffield they really understood what we were all about to feel like, and the kind of questions that we all really wanted to know'

'They weren't huge names as well so a few of them if you see them now they'll speak to you'

The majority of interviewees said their institution arranged talks from visiting artists. Most found insights into the working processes of these artists useful but felt that accounts of how they established their careers were unrelatable. Some noted that the context they were graduating into was very different and that it was not possible for them to access the same benefits as artists graduating in the 90's. Some commented that most artists' talks were delivered by well established artists from privileged backgrounds who were reluctant to reveal how they became successful artists.

'They were all very special, they had like crazy stories, it wasn't like oh I went to art uni and then this and this and this... it was all very romantic like exciting stories or sad stories'

Some said they had tried to maintain a connection with these artists but that the communication had waned and so had not been useful since graduating.

Interviewees found talks from local artists and recent graduates more beneficial than 'big names'. Talks and workshops from local Artist Run Institutions were highlighted as particularly helpful. Students felt they understood how to get established in the local scene and the challenges graduates may face, given that they were recent graduates themselves, and some maintained contact with speakers.

One LAU graduate told how a local artist-run space offered students the opportunity to volunteer with the organisation during a talk at their university. The interviewee considered taking part in this opportunity

integral to establishing their career in the arts after graduation and have since gone on to become a director at this organisation.

Graduates from Gray's highlighted the importance of their University's relationship with Artist Run Institution Look Again, who's members came to speak to students during their studies. One student emphasised the value of this connection and suggested that this relationship allowed tutors to focus on helping students to develop their practice.

'They're actively helping us move forward not just in making work'

'Lecturers jobs are to focus on our practice, there should be someone actively helping us do that as well and Gray's has that with Look Again. They have someone looking out for us for the future as well.'

GSA students stated that they were assessed on the external opportunities that they had taken part in as part of their professional practice module but received no guidance from tutors on how to find opportunities or approach organisations and were expected to participate in these out with their timetabled curriculum. One participant described being reprimanded by their tutor for engaging in professional development during studio time and had to request time off work in order to participate in the external opportunities required to pass the course.

'It's annoying that I have to do that in the first place I guess like have to jump through all these obstacles, make money to get professional practice while studying to get a good degree hopefully'

The data revealed that ARIs also create opportunities for students and graduates through volunteering, showing the work of early-career artists and through committee membership. Those who were involved with ARIs felt that the network this provided was integral to sustaining their creative practice. Interviewees reported that these communities were a source of peer learning with practitioners sharing their knowledge and skills, providing feedback and passing on information about opportunities.

'At Generator we all share you know. If we're doing applications, we can share and proofread and update our CVs'

They also gave those involved the chance to gain experience and learn skills in areas such as programming, curation, fundraising, audience engagement, buildings and operations management, institutional structures, facilitation, organisational strategy, financial management ect. which are vital for many roles in the sector. However graduates working in Scotland pointed to the voluntary nature of ARIs as a barrier for working class people, with committee members juggling multiple jobs to sustain their involvement often leading to burnout.

'At Generator because we're not, and it's the same with EMBASSY, you're not paid to do it.'

'I think once again, financially, it's just really rubbish for a lot of people who are involved in these institutions'





WHAT NOW?

These findings provoke the question: what do we want for the future of fine art education and for the UK contemporary art sector? This is particularly pertinent in the current UK context where there are debates about the increasing emphasis on employability within education. The generous and honest testimonies given by the graduates we interviewed show widespread dissatisfaction amongst students, who experienced their professional practice modules as lacking. The data also reveals the toll that the current political, social and economic climate is taking on early-career artists, particularly those from marginalised groups. It was evident from our graduate testimonies that they experienced the sector as elitist, exclusionary and exploitative and that this contributed greatly to their struggle to sustain a creative practice after graduation. Ultimately we found that these hostile conditions forced many to stop practising and withdraw from the sector entirely thus reinforcing its white, non-disabled and middle class predominance. We believe change is long overdue – how this looks will differ from institution to institution but crucially, should be done in consultation with fine art students and graduates.

Work to address structural inequalities

It is clear from our four key findings that the structural inequality embedded within our culture is reflected and reproduced in both the HE/FE systems and the contemporary art sector through inadequate student support and guidance, unequal distribution of information and opportunities, unpaid and low paid work, short-term contracts and funding allocation. The data also shows that the likelihood of, and extent to which, a graduate's professional development is negatively affected by any one of these factors is largely dependent on their socio-economic background, geographic location, caring responsibilities, disability, gender, race and/or sexual orientation.

These factors also disadvantage graduates when trying to break into the sector where, due to lack of funding for the arts, competition for opportunities is fierce. Interviewees working in major cities described an oversaturated job market whilst those outside major cities reported a lack opportunities in their local areas. It is clear that the current system pits early-career artists against each other and privileges those with prior experience and existing cultural capital, contributing to elitism within the sector. We also found that graduates are working long hours in multiple low paid/unpaid jobs leading to burnout and taking a toll on mental health for those who do manage to sustain their practice. The impact of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis is prominent in the data, contributing to the financial hardship already experienced by many working in the sector.

These findings reveal deep flaws in the notion of graduate employability and entrepreneurship. Viewing post-graduate success through the lens of employability assumes that we are living in a meritocratic society where individual merit is the measure of success, whilst failing to take account of how social structures affect the ability of graduates to establish and sustain a career in the sector. The data shows that the current social structures do in fact disadvantage graduates from marginalised groups and suggests that, unless we acknowledge and address the wider systemic issues affecting early-career artists, the reproduction of normative systems of oppression and elitism within the sector will continue. The systemic nature of these issues will require education providers, funding bodies and local organisations to work together to mitigate these challenges. By making changes that support marginalised fine art graduates to overcome the barriers they face we can make working in the contemporary art sector fairer and more sustainable for all.

In our opinion this will necessitate a radical restructuring of fine art education through a process of examining the limitations and biases of the current curriculum and untangling fine art pedagogies from the legacies of colonialism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and ableism that have shaped them.

It should also involve a continued commitment from HE/FE institutions to address structural inequality before, during and after art school. Our data showed that HE/FE outreach in the form of widening participation programmes for schools on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation/Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index made access to college/university fairer for the working-class students we interviewed. Continued and increased work in this vein could include part time and remote study options, which when offered by institutions, made it possible for students in smaller towns and cities and those with caring responsibilities to continue their studies at HE/FE level. Also highlighted in our data were the possibilities for addressing structural inequalities during study. Interviewees often reported that financial barriers limited their professional development. This could be addressed through the provision of access bursaries for materials, travel and caring responsibilities as well as providing equal access to professional development opportunities which are either paid or offered as part of the course.

Universities and colleges can also play a crucial role in enabling social mobility. Research conducted in 2023 by the Social Mobility Commission¹⁴ suggests that, on average, studying for a qualification in both higher education (HE) or further education (FE) is associated with positive earnings returns. However, it also showed there is a lot of variation across subjects, with fine art graduates earning considerably less than those from STEM subjects as well as economics and law.

In HE, graduate earnings also varied significantly by university type: more selective universities (such as the Russell Group) tended to correlate with higher graduate earnings than those universities in the post-1992 group. However, the Social Mobility Commission found that on average, the more selective universities also tended to be disproportionately less accessible to pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Students from a lower socio-economic background were more likely to choose less selective universities and courses than students with similar grades from more privileged backgrounds. This is consistent with findings in the *Universities and Social Mobility*¹⁵ report produced by the IFS and the Sutton Trust in 2012.

¹⁴ [Social Mobility Commission \(SMC\). 2023. Value of Higher and Further Education Qualifications: a Summary Report. \(Accessed on: 07/06/2023\)](#)

Addressing this issue will involve more than improving access to higher education, it will require ensuring that all graduates are equipped with the practical skills they need to work in the sector. Our data shows that those from marginalised groups were impacted more significantly than others by a lack of practical skills as they were unable to continue their creative practice if they did not obtain funding. A commitment from art schools to incorporate effective and comprehensive professional practice skills into their studio-based visual arts degree programmes, on a sustained and co-ordinated basis, would go a long way towards mitigating the effects of class inequality on graduates' prospects. Our interviewees felt that this should be done through talks and lectures by artists/art workers who can offer practical advice, as well as tutors. They emphasised the importance of interactive professional practice workshops which give students the opportunity to ask questions and get feedback.

Crucially, our data showed that the way professional practice is delivered has as much to do with how likely students are to internalise it as what is included in modules. Voluntary professional practice programmes, which do not earn students credit units towards their degree awards, signal to them that these skills are not valuable or important for life after art school. Consequently attendance is quite patchy – especially as these modules are often delivered in the final year, when students are focused on finalising assessed creative work and working towards degree show.

Much of the recent work published in contemporary art theory highlights concerns regarding the instrumentalisation of art education by neoliberal government employability agendas¹⁶. This is indeed cause for concern, however, graduates must nonetheless continue to operate within these systems. The question is how can we help them to do this whilst resisting the privatisation and consumer-driven model of education? The acquisition of practical skills is distinct from the entrepreneurial ethos in the current Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Art and Design Subject Benchmark Statement which measures attainment by how well students demonstrate 'entrepreneurship'.

¹⁵ [Universities and Social Mobility: Summary Report. 2012. IFS and the Sutton Trust. \(Accessed on: 07/06/2023\)](#)

¹⁶ [Kenning, D. 2019. Art world strategies: neoliberalism and the politics of professional practice in fine art education, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 18:2, 115–131, DOI:10.1080/14702029.2018.1500112 \(Accessed on: 17/11/2021\)](#)

¹⁷Learning how to complete tax returns, for example, is something artists can maintain as separate from their artistic identity, whereas being an entrepreneur is embodied in a set of behaviours which merge with identities at the most intimate, subjective level. Teaching professional practice skills whilst simultaneously encouraging students to think critically about the systems they are working within could be viewed as a strategy that addresses systemic inequality by making continued creative practice after graduation possible for marginalised individuals whilst resisting this instrumentalisation.

Arts organisations can also contribute to addressing structural inequality in the sector by implementing positive action measures to address disadvantages, different needs and/or encourage applications from marginalised individuals. Providing reasonable adjustments and access bursaries for disabled artists/art workers during recruitment as well as throughout their time with the organisation would also support these graduates. Simplifying application processes for advertised roles and providing explicit marking criteria would greatly reduce application labour (something our interviewees flagged as contributing to burnout, disillusionment and reduced confidence in their abilities).

Recent sectoral studies including ¹⁸Industria's 2023 inquiry, *Structurally F___ked*, ¹⁹The Uncultured's 2023 survey *Open Doors* and ²⁰Unlimited's 2023 report *Nothing for Nothing* have drawn attention to the fact that voluntary labour is propping up the UK contemporary art sector and all highlight the pressure many early-career artists/art workers feel to work for free. This was prominent in our own findings, as was the clear advantage this gave to students/graduates who were able to undertake unpaid work. Ending voluntary labour and committing to pay artists/art workers fairly is vital for ending elitism in the sector and addressing structural inequality as it pertains to socio-economic status. Drawing up contracts which clearly outline what artists are being paid for and providing payment schedules in advance as well as production budgets up front would also mitigate the financial precarity, cited by many of our interviewees as a main factor in their decision not to continue working in the sector, as would eradicating zero-hour contracts and providing more long-term roles.

Many interviewees felt that there were a lack of graduate opportunities available either due to fierce competition or a shortage of opportunities in their locale. Funding bodies can work to address this through decentralising funding allocation. In saying this we are not arguing for a reallocation of funds or the defunding of organisations in major cities, many of whom are already struggling with financial insecurity, but a commitment to provide targeted funding for individuals and organisations in areas that are currently underfunded/ geographically isolated.

There should also be serious consideration given to how the current models of individual project funding can be reformed beyond a project-by-project basis, moving towards more long-term solutions in order to end precarious working conditions for early-career artists. These are actions that align with both Creative Scotland and Arts Council England's strategic priorities which outline a commitment to supporting and developing the arts through advocating for fair work and equality, diversity and inclusion and recognise the role that culture can play in building the identity and prosperity of places, creating stronger communities, and inspiring change.

²¹By supporting artistic experiment and risk, direct funding gives artists control over how, and what they make, providing equality of opportunity and contributing to a healthy balance of power in visual arts infrastructures. It also enables artists to pursue and hone a particular way of working providing a bridge to high-quality opportunities which further their careers and develop their practice, making it more sustainable. This nurturing of individual practitioners is ultimately an investment in the future of the UK contemporary art sector as it encourages innovation and growth in the creative economy.

¹⁷ Scarsbrook, S. 2021. *Artists and the art school: experiences and perspectives of fine art education & professional pedagogies in London art schools, 1986-2016*. [Thesis] (Unpublished). (Accessed on: 12/06/2023)

¹⁸ Industria. 2023. *Structurally F___ked: An inquiry into artists' pay and conditions in the public sector in response to the Artist Leaks data. a-n The Artists Information Company*. (Accessed on: 13/04/2023)

¹⁹ The Uncultured. 2023. *Open Doors: The Real Cost of Artist-Led Spaces*. (Accessed on: 31/05/2023)

²⁰ Unlimited. 2023. *Nothing for Nothing*. (Accessed on: 31/05/2023)

²¹ Jones, S. 2019. *Artists' livelihoods: the artists in arts policy conundrum*. Doctoral thesis (PhD), Manchester Metropolitan University. (Accessed on: 09/06/2023)

Burst the art school bubble

Our findings show that a creative community is vital to sustaining a creative practice after graduation. They also show that most students feel disconnected from their local art scene whilst studying, and leave art school with no networks out with the student body. Due to COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis, many graduates have been forced to move away from the city they studied in leading to a lack of connections with other artists/art workers in their local community. This is leading many to feel isolated and leaving them struggling to sustain their practice.

Moreover, our data showed that the reluctance of course tutors to discuss the economic realities of life after art school leaves students at a loss as to how to support themselves post-graduation and creates much shame around using their creative practice for financial gain. As one of the institutions which make up the art world, fine art education does not operate in a vacuum and is ultimately linked to economic activity in the sector, even if it has maintained its romantic 'myth of exception'. Our data shows that the perpetuation of this myth leads many working-class graduates or those with caring responsibilities to believe that working in the sector is not a viable option for them.

In general, the graduates we interviewed had a multifaceted and expanded approach to creative practice which often involved writing, facilitation and curating alongside making physical work. This means that a fine art degree that focuses solely on studio work creates limitations for students and fails to acknowledge the realities of working in the sector today, one in which early-career artists often 'wear many hats'.

It is also clear from our data that students lack a basic awareness of how the art world works and how they can participate in it. One of the most vital things art schools can do is to adopt a joined up approach, working with arts organisations in their local area. Our findings show that placements with local arts organisations can develop students' awareness, provide them with crucial in-situ hands-on experience and help them develop the skills they need to work in the sector. ²²Due to the fact that there are as many different art worlds as there are ways of

inhabiting them, the teaching of professional practice skills should not take a one size fits all approach but should be responsive to the local and global context that students are working in. This was a view which was particularly emphasised by graduates who worked/and or studied in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland who saw their priorities, way of working and engaging with the sector as fundamentally different from those in other parts of the UK.

Graduates found talks by local early-career artists/ARIs to be extremely beneficial whilst studying. Alumni are a valuable and underused resource that universities and colleges could draw upon to create networks and provide peer-to-peer learning and support for their students. Our data also showed that ARIs are a vital source of graduate opportunities, networks and skill sharing. This supports findings by ²³Scottish Contemporary Art Network (SCAN) detailed in their 2015 *Mapping the Visual Arts in Scotland* report that highlight peer networks, either artist to artist, through organisations or grass roots collectives, to be the most supportive and positive aspect of the visual arts in Scotland, closely followed by supportive funders. Funding bodies could invest in graduates' futures by ensuring the sustainability of these spaces through the creation of ring fenced funds specifically for ARIS and funding pots dedicated to helping with core costs such as renting space or cooperatively buying property and purchase of equipment.

Finally, our data showed that those who received mentorship from local artists/arts workers found this hugely beneficial for their professional development. The fact that SCAN found that 74% of survey respondents cited peer-to-peer mentoring as having a positive impact on their professional development, suggests that this form of support may benefit mentors as well as their mentees. Organisations could play a pivotal role in growing and connecting creative communities in their region by offering mentorship schemes and by creating more opportunities for connection/knowledge exchange for recent graduates, both among peers and intergenerationally. This would have a positive effect on local art scenes and could increase graduate retention in their area.

²² Becker, H. 1982. *Art Worlds* / Howard S. Becker. 25th anniversary edition, University of California Press, 2008. (Accessed on: 20/10/2021)

²³ Scottish Contemporary Art Network. 2015. *Mapping the Visual Arts in Scotland*. (Accessed: 12/05/2023)



Appendix 1- Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We are interviewing you as part of Shifting Sands which is a UK-wide research project that seeks to better understand Art Undergraduate professional development courses and how they prepare graduates for work in the Contemporary Art sector. We are particularly interested in your experience as a 2020 graduate since leaving (HEI/FEI).

Shifting Sands: Scotland/England, which is the strand of the study that you are taking part in, focuses on the experiences of 2020 graduates from HEIs/FEIs across Scotland/ Yorkshire and the Humber region.

(My Background as a 2020 Graduate)

Just to let you know where I'm coming from, I myself am a 2020 graduate of the Royal College of Art and so I have experienced what it's like to graduate into and work in the post-covid contemporary art sector myself.

The interview should take between 45 minutes and 1 hour. You'll be asked some questions about your experience of the professional practice elements of your Undergraduate course and your experience of working or trying to gain work in the Contemporary Art sector in your first year after graduation. There are no right or wrong answers to any of our questions, we are just interested in your unique experiences.

Your participation will be kept confidential along with your responses. This means that your interview will only be shared with the research team, which consists of myself and Quinn, and we will ensure that any information we include in our report is anonymised. You might decide that you don't want to answer a particular question and that's fine. Please also feel free to interrupt me to ask for clarification, ask for breaks at any time or stop the interview for any reason.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

With your permission, I would like to record the interview so I don't want to miss any of your comments. Is that ok with you?

Warm Up

Before we begin, it would be nice if you could tell me a little bit about yourself.

1. Could you tell me a bit about your practice?
2. What made you decide to study art in University/College?

Main Interview

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your course...

1. I can see here that you studied ... at ... What drew you to this course in particular?
2. How did the course compare to your expectations?
3. Thinking back to when you were applying to Art School/College, did you have an idea of what you wanted to do when you graduated?
4. How did this change or evolve whilst you were studying?
5. What support did you receive to identify your career goals on your course?
6. Can you tell me about any skills that you developed during your course that have helped you since you graduated?
 - a. Prompt: and what are some that you feel would have been helpful to learn?
7. What does the term professional practice mean to you?
 - a. Prompt: was this a concept that was introduced to you during your course?

8. How did you find out about opportunities for professional development whilst you were studying?

a. Prompt: (placements, networking events, training days)

9. Could you tell me about some of the things that made it possible or more difficult for you to take up these opportunities?

a. Prompt: (what effect do you feel that taking part/not taking part in these had on your professional development?)

b. Prompt: (Bursaries? Skills? Confidence? Time? Mentoring? Access requirements? Discrimination? Networks? Other commitments?)

10. How did you connect to the wider contemporary art sector whilst you were studying?

a. Prompt: did your university help set up any of these connections?

11. In what ways, if any, have these connections been useful to you since graduating?

12. How do you feel that your course prepared you to work in the contemporary art sector?

13. Could you tell me about how your course equipped you with ways of working or thinking that were responsive to the current social, political or economic climate?

a. Prompt: i.e social justice issues, ethical considerations, digital economy, covid, funding shortages, the climate crisis

Now I would like to move on to some questions about your experience as a recent graduate...

14. Tell me a little about what you've been doing since you graduated?

a. Prompt: have you continued a creative practice?

15. What has prevented you/ made this more difficult for you?

a. Prompt: or what has helped you to sustain your practice?

16. Where have you been living since graduating?

a. Prompt: what's the art scene like in ...?

b. Prompt: what drew you to work there/made you stay there?

17. Have you faced any challenges whilst trying to work in the visual art sector and if so what have they been?

a. Prompt: for example race, gender, class or age related discrimination, disability, lack of space, lack of confidence, financial or time constraints ect

Cool Off

18. Is there anything that you now know that you wish you could go back and tell yourself as a new graduate?

19. Any questions or comments?

0

Appendix 2 - Scottish Graduates

Age								
18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	No Answer		
19	10	1		1		11		
<i>Transgender</i>								
Yes	No	No Answer						
2	30	1						
<i>Disability</i>								
Yes	No	Don't Know	No Answer					
8	22	2	1					
<i>Gender</i>								
Man	Woman	Non-binary	Gender Non-conforming	No Answer				
4	19	2	1	7				
<i>Sexual/romantic orientation</i>								
Gay	Bisexual	Queer	Heteroflexible	Heterosexual	Bisexual/Queer	Pansexual	No Answer	
3	5	1	1	12	1	1	8	
<i>Ethnicity</i>								
White Scottish	White English	White European	Chinese	Middle Eastern	South Asian			
22	5	3	1	1	1			

Religion								
Atheist	Open-Minded	Neutral	Religious	Greek Orthodox	Hindu	Agnostic	Spiritual	No Answer
20	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	5
<i>Caring Responsibilities</i>								
Yes	No	No Answer						
4	24	5						

Appendix 3 - Yorkshire and the Humber Region Graduates

<i>Age</i>						
18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	No Answer
9	2	1	0	0	0	0
<i>Transgender</i>						
Yes	No	No Answer				
0	13	0				
<i>Disability</i>						
Yes	No	Don't Know	No Answer			
4	9	0	0			
<i>Gender</i>						
Man	Woman	Non-binary	Gender Non-conforming	No Answer		
1	8	1	0	3		
<i>Sexual/romantic orientation</i>						
Heterosexual	Bisexual	Queer	No Answer			
7	2	1	3			
<i>Ethnicity</i>						
Black English	White English	White European	No Answer			
1	9	1	2			

<i>Religion</i>						
Atheist	Christian	Utopian	Agnostic	Agnostic Humanist	Agnostic Atheist	No Religion
5	1	1	1	1	2	2
<i>Caring Responsibilities</i>						
Yes	No					
1	12					