

FACULTY OF FINE, APPLIED AND PERFORMING ARTS

GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

External Review panel report for: Masters of Fine Art MFA in Child Culture and Masters of Fine Art Design

Reviewers

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Introduction

The panel was most grateful for the comprehensive documentation shared in advance on-line by the faculty. These allowed us to get a preliminary overview of the courses. On our two-day visit we received a warm welcome and ample opportunity to see the facilities, meet students, graduates, teaching and technical staff. We appreciate how much work is involved preparing and running the visit. In advance of the visit the panel met, having viewed the documentation, and decided to look at the courses through the lens of the student experience. We developed five core questions following the student journey from application to post-graduation. These questions led to a useful discussion of the courses' educational philosophies, pedagogic practices and the administrative and support systems within the university systems. The report is set out below according to the official criteria.

Criteria One

Achieved study results correspond to learning outcomes and the qualitative targets of the Higher Education Ordinance

The panel agreed that the overall quality of the education in both programmes is high and in line with higher education programs of quality from other parts of Europe. The teaching staff should continue with current teaching practices as the students are producing high quality critical and reflective outcomes. The panel felt that the plurality of the MFA Design course and its emphasis on expanding the thematic/theoretical content of the students work and its materialisation (or unmaterialisation - in the 'form' of performances, actions etc.), was advanced and well-supported by the faculty. Congruently, the panel appreciated the focus of the MFA Child Culture course and was equally impressed with the support provided by the faculty.

Criteria Two

Teaching has student learning as its prime focus

The teaching staff should continue with their strong student-centred focus. The panel found the students to be very satisfied with the availability and time given by the teaching staff. Most importantly, the students feel safe and supported. On Child Culture the panel noted the positive feedback from current students and graduates saying the staff have created a very special and unique shared and caring culture. The MFA Design students felt they could access support whenever they needed it. If they had problems of any kind (professional, personal), they knew who to speak to and felt cared for.

The teaching staff should continue to foster an inclusive environment whether that be for people from different countries, religions, classes, sexualities, genders or students with special needs.

Speaking with staff, primarily from MFA Design, the panel understood that the faculty felt increasingly stretched and over-burdened with new systems of administration, standardised assessments and evaluations implemented by the university. The increased prioritisation of standardisation, performance indicators and metrics often means that holistic, affective and wellbeing education are seen as less important in the educational endeavour. This is a growing issue affecting higher education across the EU and the UK, with detrimental results to the quality of education and research, and the erosion of university cultures (Deasy and Mannix McNamara 2017). What is a concern is the increasing acceptance of managerial values at the expense of core educational and academic values, a transition which the panel urges the university to fight against. The panel urges reflection on the limits of metrics (Bornemark 2018). With this in mind, it is the panel's opinion that university managers must create a more inclusive and transparent system in implementing changes, one which ensures that the staff are supported, encouraged to develop professionally, and if necessary shielded from increasing and unnecessary managerialism.

As in so many other higher education institutions, there is a risk that the staff become demoralised, leave and the outstanding spirit of the courses will be damaged. The wellbeing of the staff is critical to the success of the university and they need support in their teaching and research ambitions. Some staff felt there was little opportunity for professional development and research funding was uneven or unavailable. The organisation as a whole seemed opaque.

References

- Bornemark, J. (2018) *Det omätbaras renässans : En uppgörelse med pedanternas världsherravälde* (Första upplagan). Stockholm: Volante.
- Deasy, C. and Mannix-McNamara, P. (2017) *Challenging Performativity in Higher Education: Promoting a Healthier Learning Culture*. On-line. Available at HTTPS: <https://www.intechopen.com/books/global-voices-in-higher-education/challenging-performativity-in-higher-education-promoting-a-healthier-learning-culture>

Criteria Three

The content and type of teaching/instruction shall be based on scholarship and/or on artistic practice, and on proven experience

The teaching staff should continue to build on its outward-facing attitude offering situated learning opportunities outside the university with local government, municipal, commercial and not-for-profit organisations. While this kind of learning provides students with valuable experience of how the world works it also enables them to critique current practices in a meaningful way and leads to focussed and context-specific innovation.

Many of the staff have a very strong research record and the quality of intellectual pursuit is very high. Some graduates felt there was a slight bias towards academic research. It would be beneficial to reflect on how aesthetics is practiced to ensure there is a balance between academic scholarship, manifest in the written work, and artistic practice manifest through making. The staff team should ensure visual and haptic intelligence is getting sufficient support. It might be useful for staff to further consider how to include artistic practice in research, and to challenge the traditionally binary divide between research and practice methods. As seen in several design schools, in several countries, there is a growing trend for design education to place more emphasis on theory than practice. This is not necessarily welcomed by students and graduates (Dalton 2019; Iben Almbjerg and Lindberg 2019)

As reference we include two strikes in the design and film school in Copenhagen. These examples show students expressing their concerns about shrinking practical art and design education and teaching knowledge.

References

Dalton, B. (2019) Danish film industry supports strike by national film school students to remove director. *Screen daily*. On-line. Available at HTTPS: <https://www.screendaily.com/news/danish-film-industry-supports-strike-by-national-film-school-students-to-remove-director/5144916.article>

Iben Almbjerg, S. and Lindberg, K, (2019) Vinca Wiedemann stopper som rektor på filmskolen. Elever er»overraskede, men også lettede«. *Berlingske*. On-line. Available at HTTPS: <https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/vinca-wiedemann-stopper-som-rektor-paa-filmskolen.-elever-er-overraskede>

Haahr Hansen, J. (2020) Protestskrivelse på kunstakademiet Desingskole blev fjernet af ledelsen efter halvanden time. *Politiken*. On-line. Available at HTTPS: <https://politiken.dk/indland/uddannelse/art7634601/Protestskrivelse-på-Kunstakademiet-Designskole-blev-fjernet-af-ledelsen-efter-halvanden-time>

Criteria Four

Teachers have up-to-date and adequate competence as regards their subjects, teaching and learning in higher education, and subject-based teaching and learning, and that the number of teachers is in proportion to the scope and content of the study courses and programmes

The senior managers and staff team must seek a gender balance among staff. The student body and the staff team gender ratios do not reflect each other. The students are 75% women and 25% men and the reverse is true of the faculty. The trend of an increasing number of female students in art and design departments across Europe does not appear to be slowing, and universities need to rebalance their staff to reflect this. The Panel encourages the senior managers and staff team to seek a more multicultural and international balance in staff appointments to mirror the student body.

The staff team should continue with the planned reorganisation of the large pool of staff to create small teams around each course. This more collegiate approach will ensure joint ownership of the courses and mitigate against isolation felt on occasion by the course leaders.

Staff should continue to innovate to develop new teaching and learning methods. There were some interesting and well received examples of innovation, the 'critical friend' scheme for example. The students also reported the bridge course between first and second years was very helpful.

The University should continue to seek diversity among students. The ambition to tailor the education to the individual's ambition in art and design is commendable. As a result, the staff teach and manage a very broad range of practices. This is supported by the facilities and the breadth of practices among the larger pool of teaching staff. However some students felt some areas such as UX and communication design are slightly underrepresented among the staff team. Nevertheless the students value the range of practice which is united through the teaching of critical approaches regardless of the skill base.

The panel encourages the staff teams to reflect on how they can diversify their own knowledge in recognition of the diversity of the students. They need to consider what bridges they can make if they understand themselves to be Eurocentric in order to broaden their knowledge in terms of both context and references, in turn 'infecting' the library and other knowledge resources. As a simple example, the library holds mostly Swedish and European books and it led the panel to wonder if the education is too Swedish or European specific. MFA Design students felt there could be more international references. The library could be broadened quite easily by encouraging international students, alumni, and faculty to make a three-book recommendation. The staff should seek ways to leverage input from alumni to challenge Eurocentric references and contexts. The staff should investigate how the curriculum translates to other cultures. There are several international projects initiated by individual staff that could be more explicitly integrated into course strategy and supported by the university. The staff and senior management need to find out who else is doing this and how they can connect.

The staff should elevate discourse on sustainability which is currently (and very admirably) embedded as part of the discourse so that it can be more celebrated and made more explicit.

Criteria 5

The education and training provided is relevant to the needs of the students and society

The courses should continue with their clear mission for design to address societal issues. The courses have a very strong philosophical position. MFA Design students reported they very much valued questioning the design process, the freedom they have in defining their own project, the critical engagement with wide socio-cultural contexts and the concern of sustainability that informs all courses.

The university must better communicate the courses to potential applicants. The website is inadequate, it does not communicate clearly and is not memorable. As a result, the courses are being heavily undersold in a crowded educational market. The unique points of difference, the atmosphere and experience, and the climate of trust needs to be celebrated and communicated. Emotional and intangible qualities are very important to the student experience and choice of where they apply. The staff should have direct input into the content of the website in order to fully communicate the courses. According to the staff, there is increasing professional demand for Child Culture graduates, and the university needs to communicate the opportunities more clearly. There is an urgent need for a social media strategy to communicate the experience, outcomes and opportunities the course offers. At present there is no way for applicants or incoming students to see the work of current or former students.

The university must explore the adequacy of the university as a whole regarding the practical support for students with housing problems, mental health problems or other life stresses.

The panel encourages the courses to help better prepare graduates for the transition to working after college. The courses need to implement practical ways of consolidating the graduate network and leveraging advice and support from their graduate networks for newly graduating students. Given the scope of the courses and the international cohorts, there needs to be a more international approach to advising students on international post-graduation destinations. Students said they would welcome a continuing relationship with the university. Students and graduates appreciated the alumni talks but thought practical workshops on how to set up your own business or how to apply for public funds and grants, for example, would help them to transition to work.

Criteria 6

Students have influence in the planning, delivery and follow-up of study courses and programmes

Staff should continue with the thorough student involvement in evaluation now in place. Student feedback revealed that there is extensive negotiation in planning delivery and follow up.

Criteria 7

There is a study and learning environment that is accessible and purpose-oriented for all students

The university should maintain the world-class workshop facilities and potentially highlight this strong quality of the school to prospective students. Awareness of the strong qualities of the workshops in relation to the design education and the school's should be taken into consideration when moving to the new locations so they are not lost.

The staff should revisit the design of the base studios to ensure students have adequate space for different kinds of practice. The MFA Design studio is at present quite desk based and looks like a product design studio, which does not reflect the diversity of practices. This may well be limiting the activities and scale of the work undertaken by students. It is also rather crowded and according to some students it can get quite noisy. It would be useful to develop a strategy to deal with these issues.

Criteria 8

There is continuous follow-up and improvement of study courses and programmes

The staff should continue to run their current student satisfaction evaluation system which is very thorough and upon which the students evidenced is acted upon in a timely manner

Summary

Overall the panel felt the courses were in good health. They were impressed by the student's accounts of staff commitment, the strong critical and reflective focus in the learning and teaching and the positive course climates. The panel saw evidence of excellent practice in evaluation and course development. This is supported by exceptional workshop facilities and technical support.

Areas for improvement include upgrading the website to communicate the strengths and experience of the courses more effectively. Every effort is needed to bring the staff gender ratios into balance with the student gender ratios. The staff team needs to develop a plan to diversify knowledge and make sustainability more explicit. The studio spaces need reconsideration. The staff need to ensure there is a balance between academic and artistic practices. Students need more guidance pre-graduation on life after college and the courses could use their alumni network to more advantage. Of most concern was the increasing workload on tutors and programme managers which may come at a cost to their health and loyalty.