

Postgraduate Programmes in Design – The UK Perspective

Shashank Mehta
Faculty of Industrial Design
National Institute of Design
Ahmedabad

‘Postgraduateness is primarily and constantly about ‘deep learning’ defines the RCA prospectus. RCA – The Royal College of Art, London, UK is the world’s only wholly postgraduate university of Art & Design and offers the postgraduate programmes of the duration of 2 years (6 quarters). These postgraduate programmes lead to MA, with either theory / course or projects / applied as options. While RCA’s PG programmes are of the duration of 2 years, most of the other over 80 design institutes in UK offer the PG programmes in Design that are of the duration of 1 year (3 quarters).

Design Education in UK

Design Education in UK has undergone a sea change in the past few years to meet the increasing demands from both the domestic as well as the international design industries and also to cater to the students from varied cultures and societies. The **diversity and flexibility** offered by the UK design institutes make such education attractive to the international students. These institutes have recognized the different cultural ‘perspectives’ and values in international design practice and thus have modified their courses to offer the required flexibility to the international students. Thereby enabling the students **to develop their individual abilities and approach** that is in keeping with the student’s own national aspirations and requirements. Students can choose to specialize (vertically) or to explore the connections between different disciplines (horizontally). These Institutes have close linkages with the industries and get regular feedback from them to maintain the contemporariness of their education system. UK is, today, the most preferred destination for the students from across the world to study Design, both at the postgraduate and at the undergraduate levels.

Pushed to the wall, with limited or no financial support / funding from the government, coupled with the fierce competition from both the UK and the international design institutes, these institutes had to constantly modify, update and refine their courses to keep them **relevant and focused to the**

contemporary needs and at the same time flexible enough to accommodate the cultural diversity of the international students. Some of the nagging students' problems, also faced by NID, such as students taking extra / more time for making their portfolio or lack of design students' interest in theory courses, have been creatively addressed. Portfolio building / making is offered as a separate course and is part of the curriculum, both at the foundation (UK offers separate, independent one year foundation programme) and at the undergraduate level. Thus, the efforts by the student not only get assessed but the student also gets professional guidance from the faculty to clearly articulate and present his / her work. Realizing that the design students' main interest lies in creating designs /applications and in visual reading rather than the texts / theory, the theory courses, here, are very well and creatively integrated and built around the design projects. Since education, and particularly the higher education, in UK being one of the costliest in the world, these institutes have to really **package and integrate their courses well** to meet both the students' need and aspirations and the industries' requirements, in order to attract the international students. To make the postgraduate programmes economically attractive, these programmes are made **intensive**, thereby requiring **relatively less time** than other countries, for their completion.

Amazed, during my visit to some of these design institutes in UK, by the sheer number of students these institutes and each of their classes were catering to, particularly coming from NID background, I was curious to know as to how does the faculty handle these huge classes and manage the quality of outputs. While RCA's student strength is about 800 students, some of the other design institutes have about 2000 to 3000 students with the class strength ranging from 20 to 60 students. In fact the **'peer pressure'** and **'group dynamism'**, as I learnt, helps and pushes the student to perform at his / her best in the class. The faculty / course teacher acts more as facilitator and a mentor to help student set and achieve his/her goal. The courses, which are both full time and part time, provide the **flexibility to the student to break the study**, if required for any reason, and **rejoin it at a later stage**. In the postgraduate programmes, of three quarters in one-year duration, if a student leaves after the first quarter, he /she gets PG Certificate, after the second quarter gets PG diploma and on completion of his /her study –i.e. three quarters, s /he gets the PG degree. The inputs are designed in a way that student can still find work and earn his living from any of the three levels of inputs that he has got.

The financial constraints also forced these institutes towards **long-term professional associations / alliances with the industries**. Industry- led design projects, Industry focused pure and applied research are therefore well integrated in the course curriculum itself, particularly at the PG level, with a clear commitment in terms of time frame and the outcome. Some of the studios / labs or even their equipments /furniture etc. are sponsored by the industries with the matching commitment of return from the institute in terms of design research / student projects. Industries sponsor students, provide support materials, fund staff research, and help the institutes to establish a chair of Design. This helps, both the faculty members and the students, to understand the industries, their strengths and constraints in a better perspective while at the same time getting the experience of working on live projects. **Effective and intelligent linkage of education and industry**, it has been realized, will be essential for the benefit of the society in future.

Design, already recognized by the UK government as one of its major industry sector, having an estimated design activity at about £ 27 billion (year 2000). There are about 4000 design companies in UK itself. Further there are about 80 design institutes that generate £1 billion (year 1999) as yearly overseas fees. Undoubtedly UK has today truly become the **‘design-hub’** of the world. ‘Britain is the home of design. British design and its history is the richest in the world’ wrote Alberto Alessi in *The Times*. The design institutes in UK have been successful in **adapting to the demands and needs of the time**. It will, therefore, be worthwhile to look at the experiences gained by these institutes /universities during our efforts in redefining and repositioning the Postgraduate programmes in Design here at NID.

Nature of PG Programmes in Design

The RCA prospectus further defines‘The successful student should not only be capable of applying the skills and knowledge of today, but also of **thinking and practicing beyond these in substantial and demonstrable ways.**’ As Prof. Christopher Frayling, Rector, Royal College of Art recommends, ‘the Art, Design and Communication at the postgraduate level should be taught through **‘ project-based education’; face-to-face teaching’ and ‘professional orientation’**’.

For this, the prospectus adds;

‘Education at postgraduate level must be **advanced, focused and independent**:

- Advanced in the sense that postgraduates are assumed to have acquired understanding and abilities / skills, both general and specific, at undergraduate level (or equivalent) prior to entering the course.
- Focused, in that the education deals in depth with a specialized discipline or field rather than a broad educational experience
- Independent, in that postgraduates are expected to apply their understanding and abilities / skills to new, complex and unpredictable situations and to be in a position to evaluate and justify their outputs in an academic / professional environment.

By combining these three, students demonstrate what is known as ‘**mastery**’ – i.e. demonstrable skill, appropriate knowledge and maturity of practice.’

The admissions for the postgraduate courses – MA in Design, are generally **open to any graduates**, either from Design, Art or related technical background, and also to those who are looking to advance and broaden their career potentials. The candidates are selected mainly through **interviews** and **presentation of their portfolio** and previous work experience. The main criteria for selection are the **maturity and readiness** to undertake the postgraduate study, besides the creative attitude and analytical ability. Those without portfolio or work experience in the related field are given a design problem, at least a month in advance, to solve and present it during the interview. Students are selected on the basis of their **talent, ambition and will to succeed**, and for their **potential to contribute to the discipline** in terms of new knowledge. The Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, London, one of the five design institutes under the umbrella of London Institute, and one of the prestigious design institutes in the world today, houses extensive range of students (including both in UG and PG courses) from sixty five different countries, from all age groups and with diverse cultural backgrounds. The underlining objective of these postgraduate programmes is for the students **to learn to navigate by themselves** and **arrive at a confident definition** of their own position. Institutes therefore ask the students to define and write about the project of his/ her interest, in the application form itself (generally for the one year PG

programmes). This is then discussed and finalized during the interview, for the student to work further during his/ her study.

The programme basically offers a **focused period of study** for the student to develop his / her personal project idea to a level of postgraduate quality and having relevance to his appropriate discipline. This provides the student an opportunity to experiment, reflect and rethink; an opportunity to improve and learn new skills and approaches and an opportunity for professional updating. 'The key to a successful postgraduate course...' mentions RCA prospectus ' .. is the balance between the **scaffolding** and **independent learning**.' The PG courses are thus structured with an objective to provide the student the freedom and flexibility to pick and choose the courses of his / her interest and relevance. This provides the student time for internalization and experimentation. All these blossoms even further due to an environment that encourages experimentation, risk-taking (failure included) and the breeding of new affinity groups for cross-fertilization of ideas. Careful scaffolding through right balance between the students initiative and academic / faculty support, enable students to become independent learners. The regular pattern of study at the university usually involves tutorials, seminars, lectures, real life exposures and research built around the student's personal project along with group projects that encourages the student autonomy and at the same time provides real life experiences.

The MA courses, as mentioned earlier, are divided in **three quarters** and are of **48 weeks** durations while the part time MA courses are of 96 weeks duration. These courses are broadly structured in three phases; viz. diagnostic, negotiated and finally an independent phase. During the first phase, that is diagnostic phase, the student is expected to contextualize and refine his / her project and gain new perspective of himself / herself and his/her work. This is done largely through lectures, seminars, individual tutorials, presentations, group projects, workshops etc. The second phase involves further refinement and development of the project through individual research, in order to arrive at a final definition and also to evaluate in terms of its practicality. At this stage the student also completes his / her postgraduate diploma. In the final phase, that is Masters / Thesis phase, the student realizes and completes his / her personal project in form of final out come, a product etc. This involves enhanced research and application of his/her earlier learning of analytical, practical and aesthetic skills. The two years programmes at RCA offer a large number of group projects / platforms where both the first year and second year students are

provided the opportunity to work together. The courses, lectures, seminars, workshops, visits etc. are weaved around these projects. What differentiates MA / PG level of study, is the **substantial amount of research** that gives the student sound and deep knowledge of the subject-area, that helps him/her extend the horizons of the subject-area through his / her original contribution.

All these postgraduate programmes are not offered as MA programmes / of three quarters duration. Based on the industry requirements, students' / learners' needs and aspirations and the institute's / department's capabilities and readiness, some of these programmes are also offered either as **postgraduate-diploma programmes** (pg-dip) of two quarters or even as **postgraduate-certificate programmes** (pg-cert) of one quarter duration. These programmes, though of short duration, give ample opportunity to those who are already working in the field to expand their experience, enhance their creative ability and to update themselves. The courses, both full time and part time, are structured as modules of block timings with structured exit and return points but with an appropriate flexibility in terms of delivery time. The emphasis, while developing the courses, as Prof. Ian Noble, head, PG & Research programmes, London Institute of Printing explained, is on **'fitting around the learner's need, instead of asking the learner to fit around 'our offer''**.

Design education, it is realized, **can have great impact on ones' ability to solve problems** and can provide the needed spark for creativity to fulfill ones' potential in this era of knowledge economy. Design is fast emerging to be the major driving force towards achieving social justice, economic advantage and above all, global positioning of the country. Constant efforts are, therefore, been made to reach out and provide opportunities to people across various sections and age groups to widen the participation; **'Cradle to grave, educational opportunities for all'** is the buzzword. The London Institute, a body of five design Institutes in UK and one of the Europe's largest center for education in Art and Design with the students strength of about 30,000 believes in providing **life long learning opportunity** - education for all and education at all stages. The extension wing of this Institute – DALI offers a range of short run certificate courses and tailored training programmes that cater to all sections and age groups of people, over and above the Institutes' extensive range of full time and part time courses. They are, as one of their faculty member mentioned, into the **'Business of Design Education'**.

New Demands on Faculty & Staff

The faculty member, in this kind of an open and flexible learning system, plays a crucial role both as **an advisor** and as **a facilitator**, through constant guidance and support, to help the student understand his / her strengths and weaknesses, find his own direction, become independent learner and help him set and achieve his goals. As the emphasis is on **developing an identity / individuality** as a person, and since the learners are an international group of students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, the faculty members have to be conscious of not embracing and imposing any one design identity or a specific style. Realizing that in this scenario the relationship between the faculty and the student can no longer be the one of giver / teacher and taker / learner, the students are encouraged to grasp and learn from his / her environment and through various other modes. The students are constantly encouraged to work in a group and learn from each other; in turn helping them recognize and imbibe the fact that **‘Good design is, first and foremost, about understanding people’**. The personal / social skills of designers are equally important for their effectiveness within the design team. The faculty member’s role here is, therefore, to engage the students in constant debate and discussions among themselves on all the various aspects of design. The faculty contact times, particularly at the postgraduate level, are kept at minimum, with a view to provide the required space to the student for his/ her self-directed research and learning, explorations and the time for internalization. The faculty inputs and guidance to the students, therefore, needs to be **crisp and focused**. As the assessment criteria at the PG level being usually soft, it heavily depends upon the faculty members’ ability and experience to recognize the original thinking and creativity. Generally, in every institute, upon joining the programme, **each PG student is assigned a faculty member** who acts as a **mentor**. The mentor constantly monitors the growth and progress of the student and helps the student in selecting the courses of his / her relevance. The faculty, in these institutes, generally comprise of a good mix of academicians, design practitioners and design researchers.

The studio / workshop support staff also plays **an equally important role** in the success of the postgraduate programmes. The students, particularly at the

MA level, in order to actualize their projects, the ones that demonstrate their capability of skills and their ability to extend the existing parameters, **need to spend considerable time in the studios / workshops**, for exploring and experimenting with their new ideas many of which involve failures and risks, and also for modifications and testing of their final outcomes. The positive and active support, guidance and encouragement from the studio / workshop staff members is therefore essential. As the emphasis is on the self learning for the PG students, these students will mainly be working on their own and taking their own decisions. Due to this ‘Can do it’ and ‘let’s do it’ attitude and their willingness to become a part of the team of these PG students are the essential and desirable qualities required of the staff members. With the flexible and elective based structure of the PG programmes and their courses, **studios / workshops have to be kept open and ready for all times**. Most institutes in UK have therefore considerably increased the support staff to meet these demands on the new system. The staff members also have to be **well trained and very well informed** of the latest in the field as the students at PG level come with the basic skills and ability and many of them also have the experience of the field. The London Institute of Fashion has therefore a ‘**Learning Day**’ once in every two months for their faculty and staff members.

Market Expectations

Answering the question, ‘what do you look for in the fresh designer?’ Mr. Tony Allan, Director, Interbrand said **the one who stands out from the crowd** is the basic requirement. One whose portfolio is bursting with fresh ideas, good all round design ability, a likable person, a team player, wider view of design, good computer skill and the one who knows ones business are some of the other necessary requirements. ‘**A design qualification is just a start**’ said Mr. Allan, ‘willingness to learn and a passion for design is must for the designer’. The young designer must be observant, knowledgeable of the happenings around him and must have an opinion of his own. ‘Drawing is not a sin, good drawing skill for quick sketches and renderings that conveys their thoughts and ideas is essential’ advised Mr. Allan, adding that ‘we do not look for computer operators with few tricks and effects’. Interbrand, founded in 1974, is today the world’s leading branding consultancy firm that specializes in a range of brand-related services. Its UK office itself gets about 3000 applications / portfolios every year with the request for internship / apprentice. **A good portfolio that is**

brief and sharp and is an extension of one's self is what the company would look forward to get from these young student designers.

Talking about the employment prospects of these young designers, particularly in UK and Europe, Prof. Alan Livingston, Principal, Falmouth College of Art & Design, said '**Short/ mid-term prospects are good for quality graduates – longer-term prospects are more difficult to predict**'. With the increasing numbers of students enrolling for Design courses every year in UK itself, the market for design graduates in UK and Europe is getting saturated and thus becoming fiercely competitive for these young designers. Designers are today **expected to change about six different careers** in their average professional life span of 40 years. 'Successful designers must be flexible – some companies require 'specialists' others expects 'generalists' working across the disciplines' said Prof. Livingston, adding that 'designers are now **trained to do other things**, get involved in other sectors also'.

Future

The roles and responsibilities of the designers are being redefined in view of the social and economic changes of the contemporary society. With the rapidly developing technological breakthroughs and fiercely competitive markets, both at national and global levels, design has today been recognized as a key component in the economic success. The emerging global '**knowledge economy**' has forced businesses to develop new approaches to design, product innovations and their marketing that leverage on their intellectual capital, Integrated product development processes, and collaborations. These developments require **designers to be flexible, imaginative, innovative and capable to collaborate** with many other disciplines.

In the new Internet world – the world of virtual information and communication, the emphasis is being shifted from **designing hardware to designing software**. The products, even the simplest products, are getting looped into systems through Internet appliances. The products, that are a combination of hardware, software and human-ware will be easier for the user to use but will be extremely difficult to design. The 'Interface' will change to 'Sminterface' - Smart Interface that understands the user and his / her mood and further to the 'Universal Interface' - an interface for the global applications. The **relationship between Design & IT** would provide the

designer with the necessary skills to contribute to this new world. Acquisition of IT / computer related design skills has therefore been a priority.

‘Beyond convergence, there is divergence. Divergence is the first thing all the students are going to think now’ said Mr. Richard Shymur, the Director of the famous Shymur & Powell Designs, further adding that ‘there has been a paradigm shift. Today is the era of **‘Form does not follow function, form is function’**. It will be the form that will convey the functions of the products’, explaining this through various examples of the company’s recent work. As the focus is now shifting from the physical functionality of the product to that of mental functionality and from that of functional value of the product to the user value of the product, the designer will have to increasingly rely on design research, user behavior study, emerging trend study and analysis, to discover and meet the needs. Strong empathy with the user, ability to do in-depth research, ability to create appropriate balance between the human-ware and that of the hardware, coupled with the original and creative thinking will therefore be essential for the designer to gain necessary edge in the market flooded with original and new ideas / products.

The future demands of the profession will increasingly put into scrutiny, the ability of the designer to manage his / her relationship with the client. The designer, at some point of time, will have to come out of the shadow of the client and be independent by setting his / her own brief, invent his /her own problem and find their solutions. **‘Designer as an Author’** – the one who takes the authorship of his /her product /idea, is therefore the demand of the time. **Ability to write and the ability to articulate** both verbally and visually, particularly verbally, will be some of the useful and vital skills for the designer in this endeavor. Going further to this, the designers would also need **to explore venturing into their own enterprise / business**, as James Dyson demonstrated through his successful business venture - now famous as the ‘Dyson Effect’, that many of the students in UK and Europe would like to emulate. By **putting design at the heart of the entire process of business**, Dyson broke many of the established rules and norms of the business.

Importance of the design is now been recognized by other sectors also. Design has helped the British government reduce crime, cut bureaucracy for teachers and helped parents getting involved in education. By 2020, at least one in every two will be above 50 years of age in Europe. **‘Inclusive**

Design' – the products that grows with the age, is the focus today in UK, products that have considerations for aging people, changing work culture and integration of disabled people. With the increasing customer awareness and with IP regulations becoming stringent across the world and with growing concerns for society and environment, **designers' challenges and responsibilities are increasing many folds.**

The young postgraduates of Design should therefore be prepared for their professional practice **as leaders in their chosen fields.** For this, they must have the depth of understanding in their chosen subject area, ability to do in-depth research and an ability to confidently resolve the problems, high motivation and commitment and most importantly should be capable of thinking and practicing beyond the boundaries of present day parameters. **'Student should complete their postgraduate studies displaying and defending what is known as 'mastery' – as in ' Master of Art'**, concludes the RCA prospectus.

(paper written for internal circulation at NID)

Reference:

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