

A Fragile Equilibrium: Undergraduate Art Education and the University

Abstract

In recent years there has been considerable discussion of practice-led research and how the work of creative practitioners can be reconciled with the metrics of the University system. There has been much less consideration and reflection on the undergraduate degree and the impact of the University framework has had on the formative years of art school students. This paper examines the relationship between undergraduate art education and the institution of the University within an Australian context. It focuses on the realities, tensions and possibilities of art education as embedded within a University. It asks what value is there in art schools being part of an educational institution that was not originally designed for artists? What are the tensions and elisions with other traditional disciplines? The paper argues that we are at a watershed moment in the history of art education and that art education in the 21st century requires new parameters and ways of thinking.

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In a recent opinion piece, Tamara Winikoff asks the question ‘What’s happening to Australia’s art schools?’. She writes that there was a time ‘when art schools were regarded as a thrilling hotbed of experimentation, bohemianism and great new anarchic ideas’ (Winikoff 2016). She posits that the Dawkins reforms of the early 1990s, when art schools moved under the umbrella of the universities, resulted in a more business-like and target-driven culture. In *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* Brad Buckley and John Conomos lament the loss of the independent art school, expressing a belief that art schools in Australia have a bleak future and that art schools would be much better as stand-alone institutions (Buckley & Conomos 2009). More recently, Lauren Harris describes the demise of the art school and the unforeseen detrimental impact of university integration (Harris 2015). Or as more

moderately stated, Sean Lowry notes there is a 'tenuous and evolving relationship between contemporary art and the academy' (Lowry 2010).

In scenarios that have played out across the country, Australian universities have been criticised for making ill-informed decisions in the management of art schools, driven by financial imperatives, and demonstrating a lack of understanding of art school teaching. To cite one example particularly salient to the undergraduate curriculum, the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) reached an impasse with Melbourne University when it introduced the 'Melbourne Model' and the requirement for all students to study 'breadth' subjects. At the time there was a backlash from the creative arts areas and a campaign was mounted based on the argument that these breadth subjects would erode the depth of the studio-based teaching (although VCA now has a thriving program of Breadth Studies that brings the wider student body into the College). In more recent times, a challenge was led against the merger of Sydney College of the Arts with UNSW Art and Design with university management criticised for not supporting or understanding the importance of art schools in Australia's cultural landscape. Similarly, in discussions on the future of the National Art School in Sydney many continue to campaign against the integration of the school into a university structure, arguing that autonomy is critical to maintaining the essence of the school. To varying levels, similar tensions and dislocations have surfaced in the majority of art schools as they have transitioned into university structures, with Buckley and Conomos describing them as shotgun weddings rather than genuine mergers (Buckley & Conomos 2009).

Given this track-record of misunderstanding, and even with many in the sector also appreciating the positive elements of university governance, it is important to continue to reflect on this union. In this paper, I particularly want to focus on undergraduate programs and address the needs and expectations of the thousands of students entering our art schools every year. For the last decade, the conversation has been dominated the status of the creative arts higher degree research programs but there are many more perspectives to consider and issues to address, particularly in relation to undergraduate teaching and the changing tertiary landscape. The uncapping of university places in 2009 has resulted in larger and more diverse student cohorts than ever before. The generation of students that are just arriving, the so-called generation Z or post-millennials, bring with them very different ways of learning and expectations. They have been characterised as technology dependent, multi-taskers, entrepreneurial, global-thinking and financially aware (given that they

have come of age during the global financial crisis). So how should art schools adapt to this new intake and is the university framework able to meet the needs of this next generation? What, if anything, does it mean to them to be studying within a university rather than an independent art school?

A significant study is required to answer these questions, as Winikoff proposes a dispassionate comparison between the past and the present (Winikoff 2016). However, in this paper I want to at least begin to develop a framework for the discussion of the future undergraduate art education within the university. I will argue that the university art school is an economic reality and that art schools should fully embrace their status as a university discipline to optimise the potential for undergraduate programs.

In any discussion of the pros and cons of particular models it is important to be highly cognisant of the relative affordability of bachelor degrees. Students in public universities have access to the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, with visual arts students receiving a higher per capita amount of government funding than areas such as law, the humanities, mathematics, social studies or education (see Funding cluster 5 at https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/2018_allocation_of_units_of_study.pdf). Whilst, students enrolled in degrees offered by private providers and institutions outside of the public university system have access to financial assistance in the form of the Higher Education Loan Program, as a rule they will have a considerably higher debt at the end of their studies. Any advocacy for the separation of art schools from universities must always consider how students can meet their tuition costs. Additionally, the amalgamation with universities improves the budget bottom-line by rationalising administration and resources.

Beyond the economic drivers, the ideological underpinnings and *raison d'être* of both the art school and the university are critical factors for successful collaboration. Only if points of mutual interest between both entities can be identified is it possible to ensure a vibrant, viable, relevant and suitably resourced education for art students. This is a challenge as both art schools and universities exist in complex ecosystems and pinpointing the moments of cross-over and intersection is not necessarily an easy task. Where institutional art education was once safely ensconced in the Academy with its rigid and prescriptive curriculum, the education of artists has become much more complex and uncertain. The old Academy was a hermetically

sealed world that controlled not only art education but also criticism and exhibitions, but as Thierry de Duve suggests art schools are now secondary in relation to the system of museums, contemporary art centers, commercial galleries and private collectors (de Duve 2009). de Duve observes art schools have not always existed, and nothing says they must always exist, questioning their efficacy in a contemporary art world by arguing that transmission of art today from artist to artist is very far from occurring directly in schools.

Even if de Duve is correct and that a considerable amount of an artist's education takes place outside of the art school, university art schools can and should still play a vital role in the contemporary art world. To do this they need to build on the best from the past and then arrive at a strategy for ensuring what works in a university setting. As Steven Madoff notes in his book on propositions for art schools in the 21st century, 'every school embodies an inheritance at least and at most an invention rising out of its inheritance' (Madoff 2009, ix). The inheritance of most of Australian art schools is convoluted and involved, with almost all of them having endured various mergers, successive identity building exercises, alongside of shifts from state to federal funding. Historically the majority of our art schools are conglomerations of various models of art teaching, from the academic to the technical. There are shadows of the past academic system that privileged drawing, copying from the 'masters', alongside of the merging of technical education, which had its origins in the Mechanics Institutes which were the forerunners to the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system.

From these complicated pasts, art schools for the last couple of decades have been tasked with reinventing themselves yet again within the paradigm of a university. In this process they have come to promote some recurring values: experimentation, creativity, innovation, artistic excellence, technical and conceptual skills, and critical thinking. But one of the crucial questions that has yet to be fully addressed is whether art schools are willing to fully embrace the idea of being a university discipline? The notion of being interdisciplinary is often raised but this normally means working across media but it is important to also consider how art fits in with other more traditional university disciplines. As Howard Singerman raised in the context of American universities, it is critical to ask whether art is a 'discipline' in the university sense of the word. He poses the important questions: 'Is art a profession learned in the university and practiced outside it, like medicine or, closer to home, architecture? Or is it a profession in and of the university, an academic discipline, like history or mathematics or, perhaps, literary criticism?... how does that difference change what is taught and learned in school?' (Singerman 2009). In the

past, art schools, especially under both the academic and technical teaching models, did teach students their profession but as the art world becomes more complex and multifarious, it makes sense to think of art schools as first and foremost the homes of the 'discipline' of art within a university rather than the one-stop professional training ground for artists.

To pursue this further it is necessary to define what is meant by a discipline. Armin Krishnan usefully defines a discipline as the 'organisation of learning and the systematic production of new knowledge'. He identifies a range of criteria, including that a discipline has a particular object of research, accumulated specialist knowledge referring to that object of research, and theories and concepts that organise the accumulated specialist knowledge (Krishnan 2009). He also argues that institutional manifestation is critical to a discipline, as it is only through institutionalisation that disciplines are able to reproduce themselves. It is not difficult to think of art as a university discipline, with art as its object of research, with specialist streams within that, and various theories organising ideas around art practice. In many ways considering art as a discipline goes back to Leonardo da Vinci's lobbying in the High Renaissance. He primarily wanted to distinguish art from manual labour but he also championed the upgrading of art to one of the liberal arts such as grammar, logic and rhetoric, the first disciplines in early European universities. Returning to Singerman, he argues that to be a discipline, art can no longer bear the definition as a just craft or technique, and must be an object of knowledge, a field carved out or claimed in relation to other fields (Singerman 1999).

If art schools take on this mantle and regard themselves as a home of a discipline rather than primarily a training ground for professional artists, this has ramifications for the student experience and the undergraduate curriculum. It certainly does not mean that studio teaching and art making is no longer core to a bachelor degree, but it does mean a shift in culture and how students think about art school, moving from the expectation that after three or four years they will be equipped to be an artist. Instead they will be joining a disciplinary group who will induct them into the discipline and provide the foundations for future pathways. One of the most important features of university art schools is that they belong to a research culture and undergraduate education should leverage off that strength. The majority of academic staff in university art schools have work profiles in which a significant amount of time is allocated to their practice. It is important to remember that university schools of art are as much about supporting the research of the teaching staff as educating the next generation of students. The importance of the undergraduate degree being embedded in this research culture cannot be underestimated and allows for the art school to align with

what was the original *raison d'être* of a university as a *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a community of teachers and scholars.

Just as the ecosystem surrounding the art school has shifted markedly, the same can be said for universities. As many commentators have noted, Australian universities are poised to be challenged by falls in government funding, and are forced to make market decisions as they become enterprises that serve clients (Davis 2012; Coaldrake & Stedman 2013). Just as many bemoan the changes to art schools, champions of the university's imperative to advance knowledge are also keenly aware of how a range of pressures, from resourcing to compliance, are detracting from the university's ability to achieve its core goals. For many universities providing vocational training become the key to winning market share, and in many ways the visual arts have been able to adapt by making a case for how the creative arts make a significant contribution to the economy (O'Connor 2011). Art, however, will always have elements of a pure discipline and will be an end in itself, providing knowledge for knowledge's sake. Or as Lowry states, contemporary art education can be antithetical to utilitarian and vocational instrumentalism (Lowry 2010). While it is difficult to predict the future (Times Higher Education 2015), it may be that universities will become less galvanized by vocational training. The rising specter of artificial intelligence (AI) and a world where technology and robotics are predicted to take over many professions, disciplines that are underpinned by creativity and experimentation and resistant to AI may have unprecedented opportunities in the university environment for the future.

The integration of Australian art schools into universities in the 1990s has had many critics who have deplored the loss of autonomy and believe that the university system has been detrimental to the energy and character of the art school. Even if this is the case, a solution needs to be found, and it is unfair on the next generation of artists to stay parked at regretting this union. The financial drivers alone will tie the institutions together for the foreseeable future. Rather than recoiling from institutionalisation, I have suggested that it is important that art schools fully embrace the status of art as a university discipline. This means that the art school is no longer solely about training artists. Instead primacy is given to advancing the knowledge of art, which means that art schools are as much about the research being produced by artists as it is about teaching, thus providing a rich and challenging research-led education. If viewed through a disciplinary lens, the art school and the university have much in common. At their core, they both aim to advance specialist knowledge, but are doing so against the backdrop of contracting resources and the challenges of a rapidly changing global and technologically advanced world. The art school versus university polemic can drain energy from the pressing issues that confront all

in the tertiary sector. It is incumbent on the members of both the art school and the university to find synergies and to move from a fragile equilibrium to a robust partnership, providing an effective framework for undergraduate art education and the rising importance of creativity in tertiary studies.

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