

Jane Andrew and
Susan Luckman
University of South Australia

Promoting the making self in the creative micro-economy

Keywords: Craft, Creative Graduates, Online Distribution, Business Skills, Creative Employment

This paper reports upon very early findings from a three year ARC Discovery project exploring how online distribution is changing the environment for operating a creative micro-enterprise, with a specific focus on designer-makers. A key research question for the project is: what are the 'self-making' skills required to succeed in this competitive environment? In addition to interviews with peak organisations and established makers in the design craft sector, the project is keen to capture rich information on the experience of establishing oneself in professional practice immediately following graduation from tertiary study. A cohort of around 40 graduates from key national art/design/craft degrees will be approached to participate in annual 1-Up interviews across the life of the project (2015-2017) in order to identify the complex decision-making which underpins this critical moment in professional development. Unlike other studies which use Census or ABN registration records, this approach valuably captures data from those who may fail and/or choose to leave creative practice, generating invaluable information about failure as well as success. However, the process of identifying potential project participants revealed wide discrepancies between institutions in regards to how they approach final year exhibitions and catalogues as potential sites for student promotion and professional transitioning. Given the competitive creative career marketplace into which our graduates emerge, it will be argued here that across the sector more consistently outward-looking, digitally-engaged transitioning and promotional strategies need to be embedded in final year assessment activities to better prepare students for the professional challenges ahead.

The Project

A making renaissance is underway, with handmade practice and goods in global demand in a way not seen since the 1970s (Luckman 2015). In the digital age, almost seventy years since the Frankfurt School first railed against the 'culture industry's' commodification and standardisation of all art (Adorno 2001; Adorno and Horkheimer 1973; Benjamin 2007), the bespoke object has become different, desirable. Mainstream consumer acceptance and the middle-class desirability of design craft items reflects, in no small part, a wider shift in the developed world towards ethical consumption and environmental awareness. Along with other increasingly popular 'urban agrarian' micro-economic practices such as the rise of

highly localised artisanal food production and farmers' markets, and the commercial growth of fair-trade items, buying handmade clothing, accessories, gifts and other items is part of a set of ethical and self-aware purchasing behaviours (Littler 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Sassatelli 2006, 2009; Soper 2009). Facilitating this is the rise of 'long-tail' distribution economic models enabled by the internet:

Our culture and economy are increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve, and moving toward a huge number of niches in the tail. In an era without the constraints of limited shelf space and other bottlenecks of distribution, narrowly targeted goods and services can be as economically viable as mainstream fare. (Anderson 2007, p. 52)

In 2014 almost US\$2 billion worth of merchandise was sold globally through the Etsy.com website launched in 2005 to specialise in handmade and vintage items, and handmade supplies. Etsy currently boasts 21.7 million active buyers, and 1.5 million active sellers (<https://www.etsy.com/au/about>). Australian sellers are the fourth largest source of items (just behind those in the US, the UK and Canada), representing a significant net export gain for Australian creative small-enterprises, and Etsy.com is just the highest-profile tip of a much larger iceberg that includes a plethora of online retail sites specialising in handmade small-scale creative production.

Recently Helen Souness from Etsy Australia emphasized Etsy's place within wider debates around the internet to contribute to what we might call disruptive economies, that is 'to reimagine what global commerce looks like' (presentation at 'Parallels: Journeys into Contemporary Making' conference held at the NGV October 17-18). She also acknowledged the ways this platform in particular, but the design craft sector more generally, is gendered with most of the Etsy business operators being women, and more than 95% of these working from home (balancing multiple aspects of life including care-giving and other work in many cases), with about 25% making a full-time income on the platform. Many of the sellers on Etsy have goods available in the average Australian gift price range, established through market research as at about \$40. And with the Australian dollar sliding, Australian sellers are increasingly globally affordable and Etsy offers a useful export platform, normally in addition to maker's own websites and other selling points (including notably physical marketplaces which remain especially important sites to build profile and market-facing expertise for emerging makers). This changing retail environment for craft provides new possibilities for sustainable craft enterprise in the wake of the closure of many traditional craft gallery retailers in the 1980s and 1990s, which saw the loss of

the middle ground of craft retail; that is, the space between high-end craft art outlets and amateurs selling at local markets.

However, despite or indeed because of these opportunities, the ease of establishing online shopfronts hides the complex work required to start and run a creative small business practice, especially one in an increasingly globally competitive space with isolated producers and narrow profit margins. This raises new challenges for craftspeople and designer-makers, who not only require practice-based skills but new entrepreneurial skill-sets—both technical and personal—to operate successfully as a micro-enterprise in this emerging global market. Therefore employing methods including semi-structured interviews with established handmade producers, 1-Up monitoring of design graduates and new design craft businesses across 3 years to longitudinally analyse the contemporary experience of establishing a creative career post-graduation, and a historical mapping of Australia’s arts and crafts support organisations, a key research question underpinning this project is: what are the self-making skills required to succeed in this competitive environment?



Figure 1 – Screenshot of Project Webpage (www.unisa.edu.au/craftingself)

The Stories behind the Graduate Destination Surveys: Why we think this research is timely

To situate our study's approach we'd like to draw your attention to how graduate destinations have been characterised and accounted for in statistical studies seeking to understand the contribution to the workforce of Australian higher education and its graduates. Here the notable word is 'workforce'. Despite a growing body of academic and policy discourse acknowledging the importance of small and micro businesses to the economy, together with a growing number of recent graduates entering the start-up world of co-working spaces and business incubators, the assessment of higher education outcomes persists in its focus on the traditional workforce and employment paradigm where a positive graduate outcome occurs when a graduate becomes an employee. We consider this broad and somewhat outdated notion of employment overlooks the diverse career and income generating paths perused by artists and craftspeople. For most practicing artists and designer/makers, their work life consists of what has come to be known as a portfolio career in which establishing an online enterprise is one of the aspect of a 'continually evolving patchwork of grant-based and /or commercial projects, jobs and educational experiences.' (Bridgstock, 2011) Yet there appears to be scant reference to this increasing trend in the data gathered on graduate destinations post-graduation.

Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) declares that the University & Beyond survey (U&B), (2009) conducted in 2007 and 2008 was, at the time, the largest survey in Australia on the expectations and perceptions of current higher education students. The survey sought to confirm existing and draw out new and unique insights into graduate recruitment by combining the results from the U&B survey with those from the Australian Graduate survey (AGS) and the Graduate Outlook Survey (GOS). The range of key insights highlighted by the U&B survey, include:

- how students see themselves adjusting to a professional life after higher education
- what attracts students to a particular employer
- the aspects of their employment that students consider to be more important than salary
- the employment attributes that students believe contribute to job satisfaction and retention
- how long students expect to stay with their first employer after graduation.

On reading the first point above we were optimistic that there may be included in this report some nuanced qualitative analysis of graduate destinations beyond the

traditional industrial employment model. Alas our optimism was not rewarded. The key questions and resulting report again focused on graduates who were engaged in the following contexts:

- in fulltime employment
- seeking fulltime employment,
- working part time or casual
- not working

There was one question within the section seeking information on the respondents main paid work (the employment that they were working the most hours) on the 30th April. The single question asks: *were you self-employed?* Unlike questions regarding their employment by an employer, there were no subsequent qualifying questions about the nature of self-employment or, for that matter, how many jobs the respondent had.

A recent report by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) considering Australia's future workforce includes a chapter by Ken Phillips called 'Your future employer –yourself' (2015). He cites the following statistic:

globally, around 97 per cent of businesses are small (with fewer than five employees) and around 60 per cent of businesses are non-employing businesses of one. The people who run the dominant number of businesses are not command-and-control firms. They are more 'consumer-like' than anything else in the way they behave. This must turn on its head the prevailing acceptance by economists of how a market economy operates. To date, there's little evidence that economic policymakers see this, understand it or have even adapted any of their thinking in this direction (p.190)

Further he states:

Self-employment can be seen as a 'rising-star', not just because of increasing numbers of self-employed people. It's more because self-employed individuals are at the cutting-edge of cultural and attitudinal change in global workforces. The supremacy of the organisation is fading and being replaced with the authority of the individual. (p.180)

This is highlighted by Bridgstock who draws on Hall's notion of the 'protean career', characterized by personal construction of career and recurrent acquisition or creation

of work (likely to occur on a freelance or self-employment basis); and strong intrinsic motivations for, and personal identification with, career (Hall, 2004). This observation is made tangible in an Australian context through Throsby and Zednik's (2010) research that found 'within their principal artistic occupations only just over one-quarter of all artists work as employees, on a permanent or casual basis, and are paid a salary or wages. The remaining three-quarters operate as freelance or self-employed individuals'. (p. 53)

Despite this recognition within academic discourse and statistical research considering the working life of people trained in the arts and creative industries, in most institutions there appears to be a strong pedagogical tradition within arts education that focuses on conceptual and artefact production with only minimal engagement with skills and strategy for professional and enterprise development. Despite art and craft practice entailing not only the creation or making of art but also its sharing and distribution, Bridgstock and Carr (2013), as do we, find it surprising that entrepreneurship and enterprise development remains at the periphery of the visual and applied arts curriculum particularly given the influence of the creative industries policy agenda in the United Kingdom and Australia, which over the last decade has linked creative work with economic growth in advanced economies. The apparent lack of attention paid to business and enterprise development within the creative arts curriculum has given rise for us to consider within the Crafting Self project how are emerging artists, craftspeople, and designer makers acquiring the skills to develop and sustain an online creative enterprise? Within the research this is a key consideration within the annual tracking of visual art and design graduates and new business start-ups across 3 years. Our research will build upon, and add depth to, existing Graduate Destination Survey data by not only including questions about emerging makers' business operations and outcomes, but about the mechanisms the participants have used to gain explicit and tacit knowledge vital to the development and promotion of an individual's creative enterprise.

Seeking out emerging makers

As teachers will know it is hard contacting and getting responses from students to emails when they are enrolled. It will be no surprise then that it is even harder contacting and recruiting recent graduates no longer connected to their graduating institution. We realised we needed a number of approaches to recruit participants that did not rely on university Alumni administrators. We initially scoured graduate exhibition catalogues; these have either been sourced from publically accessible sections of university websites, or provided as soft or hard copies by the university involved. These catalogues were requested from higher education institutions following disclosure of the intent of their use. Where graduates have provided contact

details as a part of an exhibition catalogue these details have been included in our database. Where graduates have not provided this information, contact details have been obtained through a public internet search using www.google.com. The process of identifying potential project participants revealed wide discrepancies between institutions in regards to the intent of final year exhibitions and catalogues ranging from a mere record of the student cohort and visual documentation of their work, to documents aimed at promoting their work. For example many catalogues did not include student websites or email addresses; vital for people to contact and follow artists whose work they admired and could potentially purchase, but a fraught ethical/privacy issue for the institutions. The following tables summarise the institutions and content of graduate catalogues we searched for contact details of emerging art and design graduates.

	Catalogue Produced	PDF Accessible Online	Hosted Website	All Students	1st Page Google Search: "[University Name] Graduate Exhibition"	Student Name	Student E mail	Student Phone	Student Website	Picture of Student Work	Specialisation Listed	Student Bio	Artist Statement	Weighted Score
(Weighting)	10	5	8	10	4	12	15	3	6	10	7	5	5	100
U Canberra	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	44
CIT	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	8
CDU	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	37
Utas	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	83
Curtin	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	47
CSU	?	No	No	?	No	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	###
ACA	?	No	No	?	No	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	###
ANU	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	63
UniSA	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	59
UNSW	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	97
UTS	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	69
Monash	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	88
QUT	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	47

Figure 2 - Categories of assesment of graduate catalogues

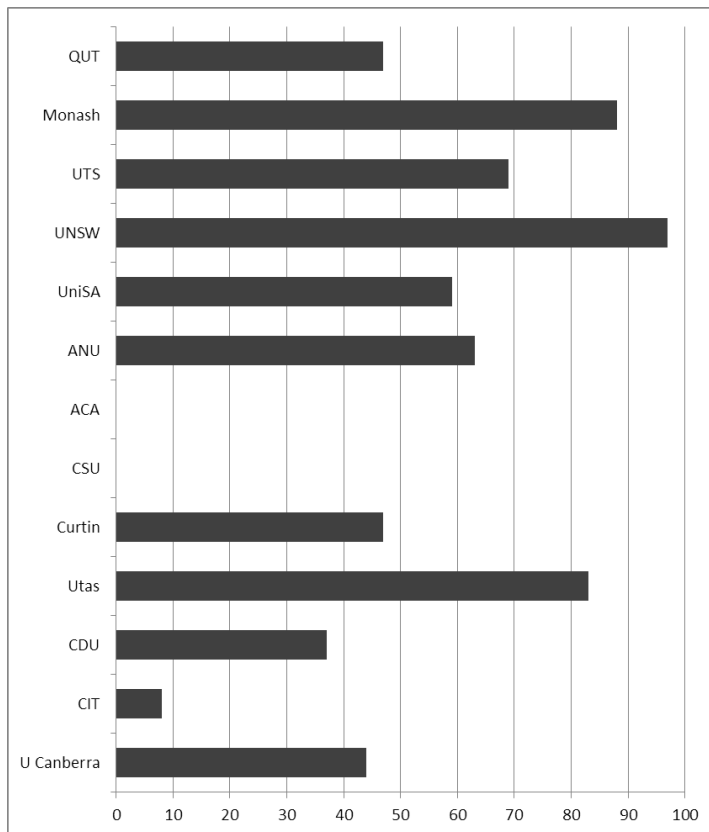


Figure 3 - Comparison of weighted scores

Clearly UNSW, Monash, and UTAS stand out from the crowd by producing more outward-looking, digitally-engaged transitioning and promotional documents for their graduates. Further research is needed to find out to what degree institutions teach business/enterprise development and promotion skills either as separate subjects or embedded within other courses and activities to better prepare students for the professional challenges ahead, and/or the degree to which students are initiating the inclusion of promotional information without the explicit instruction from teaching staff.

Early Days: Some Initial Findings

While the interview phase of the project remains in its relatively early stages with 10 emerging makers interviewed thus far, the challenges of the protean careers outlined above are already emerging as a given by graduates as they seek to negotiate their working lives. Indeed far from being the new normal as it is for some other creative professions, artists and craftspeople have long had to negotiate an all too precarious existence and thus the DIY entrepreneurial career paths now afforded them are being embraced as offering valuable new possibilities by many young makers not content to wait for opportunities to find them. What is evident when meeting emerging makers, and this is a fact backed up by the interviews with established makers, is

that now more than ever to succeed as a design craft practitioner one needs to be a hybrid graduate, an all-rounder, with skills not only in one's field of practice but also in terms of business, but most especially, in working with and communicating with other people. Ironically therefore, the graduates best able to survive in this space are not necessarily the best makers. Moreover while such breadth may distract from further focussing on honing one's specialist skills (especially in practice) and seem at odds with the image of the lone maker, whether aiming for the high-end gallery or the Etsy 'high street' all makers need networks; to build networks means having to build relationships.

At a more practical level of business development, emerging makers indicate a clear and active desire to build their business knowledge. Many have joined relevant peak bodies, notably including their local ACDC (Australian Craft and Design Centres)-affiliated organisation with the professional, especially business, skills development and affordable insurance packages they offer being particular attractors. However alternative peer-based networks are perhaps used more actively and frequently by emerging makers in search of practical business information; in this space social media including Etsy's support groups and new pop-up ARIs (artist-run initiatives) including retail spaces are seen as very collegial, sharing, 'lift all boats' cultures where information can be freely sought and shared. However, few emerging makers have written a formal business plan or have anything more than a hand-to-mouth approach to managing the financial side of their business. Many wish to one day have the opportunity to take part in the NEIS (New Enterprise Incentive Scheme) initiative (something most of our established makers have specifically mentioned they benefitted immensely from when developing their careers), though with its winding back they now doubt they will be able to benefit from this targeted entrepreneurial support. One trend we will continue to track is the greater emphasis emerging graduates place on the ease and importance of social media marketing. While emerging makers were far more likely to report finding marketing 'easy' as compared with established makers, despite this ease they clearly did not have the web traffic, sales or profile of those who found this aspect of their practice 'harder'. Once again, the apparent ease of setting oneself up may be here masking the real difficulties of earning an income as a maker. The maintenance of social media profiles can take up much of the time makers have to give to their business each week; keeping profiles freshly updated may here be functioning as a form of busy work for emerging makers, giving them the feeling of moving forward but for relatively little actual (financial or promotional) gain. The degree to which the promises of the current moment will be realised for creative graduates and how we can better prepare them for this world, is thus a core focus of this research project.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's Discovery Project funding scheme (project number DP150100485). We thank Belinda Powles for her ongoing invaluable input and assistance with the research project and, as always, the makers generous enough to share their stories with us.

References

- ADORNO, Theodor (2001). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, London, Routledge.
- ADORNO, Theodor and Max HORKHEIMER (1973). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London, Allen Lane.
- ANDERSON Chris (2007). *The Long Tail: How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand*. London, Random House.
- BANKS, Mark (2007). *The Politics of Cultural Work*. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- BENJAMIN, Walter (2007). *Illuminations*, trans. Leon Wieselter, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books.
- BRIDGSTOCK, Ruth S. (2011). 'Making it creatively: Building sustainable careers in the arts and creative industries'. *Australian Career Practitioner Magazine*, 22(2), 11-13.
- BRIDGSTOCK, Ruth & CARR, Lauren. (2013). 'Creative entrepreneurship education for graduate employability in the creative arts'. Paper presented at the The CALTN Papers: The Refereed Proceedings of the Creative Arts Learning and Teaching Network Symposium 2013.
- Graduate Careers Australia. (2009). *University and Beyond: Snapshot Report* Melbourne: Graduate Careers Australia
- HALL, Douglas (2004). 'The Protean Career: A quarter-century journey'. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65(1), 1-13.
- LITTLER, Jo (2011). 'What's Wrong with Ethical Consumption?' *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Lewis, Tania and Emily Potter. London and New York, Routledge, pp. 27-39.
- LITTLER, Jo (2009a). 'Gendering Anti-Consumerism: Alternative Genealogies, Consumer Whores and the Role of *Ressentiment*'. *The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently*, ed. Soper, K., M. Ryle and L. Thomas. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 171-87.
- LITTLER, Jo (2009b). *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture*. Maidenhead and New York, Open University Press.
- LUCKMAN, Susan. (2012). *Locating Cultural Work: The politics and poetics of rural, regional and remote creativity*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- LUCKMAN, Susan. (2015). *Craft and the Creative Economy*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

- PHILLIPS, K. (2015). 'Your future employer - yourself'. In Committee for Economic Development of Australia (Ed.), *Australia's future workforce?* (pp. 179 -190). Melbourne: CEDA
- SASSATELLI, Roberta (2009). 'Representing Consumers: Contesting Claims and Agendas'. *The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently*, ed. Soper, K., M. Ryle and L. Thomas. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25-42.
- SASSATELLI, Roberta (2006). 'Virtue, Responsibility and Consumer Choice: Framing Critical Consumerism'. *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*. ed. John Brewer and Frank Trentmann. Oxford and New York, Berg, pp. 219-50.
- SOPER, Kate (2009). 'Introduction: The Mainstreaming of Counter-Consumerist Concern'. *The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently*. ed. Soper, K., M. Ryle and L. Thomas. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-21.
- THROSBY, David, & ZEDNIK, Anita. (2010). *An economic study of professional artists in Australia*. Sydney, Department of Economics, Macquarie University.