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Job-Ready Graduates?: Examining the Professional Development of Students in Australian Art Schools.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Art Schools, Job-Ready Graduates, Professional Development, Arts Entrepreneurship

Introduction

As the funding landscape for the arts continues to weaken, the need to equip fine art students with a comprehensive skillset to navigate and survive the challenges of the contemporary sector is becoming increasingly important (Penning and Eltham 2021). One approach towards equipping these students includes the development of a bridge between universities and the sector that supports student transition from one to the other. This is a bridge comprised of discipline-relevant knowledge and skillsets that imbue a sense of confidence in the student as they leave the university to pursue their career. Many fine art departments in Australian universities nurture the growth of this bridge through the inclusion of professional development programs within their Bachelor of Fine Art degrees alongside the development of an artistic practice. These two components of a fine art degree work together towards the fulfilment of a student's 'job-readiness' at the point of graduation.[1] This article argues, however, that the tangibility of this bridge is not always evident to undergraduate students. I have found from anecdotal experience that some students do not feel 'job-ready' to embark on a career as an artist, as they more often feel unprepared for this transition. To understand why students might not share in perceiving this bridge that universities deliberately pave, I investigated the scope of pedagogical approaches to teaching professional development skills to fine art students undertaking undergraduate fine art degrees in Australian higher education institutions. This paper provides an overview of this study.

The Threads of Curiosity

[1] The term 'job ready' is a marketing term coined and utilised by universities as a tangible outcome of tertiary education. For example, see The University of Melbourne's "Job Ready Program" that is integrated across faculties and used throughout the university (The University of Melbourne n.d.).

The curiosity underpinning this investigation has been woven together by two threads of stimuli. The first thread emerges from several occasions where I have been invited to present guest lectures to undergraduate fine art students on arts funding due to the subject matter of my doctoral research into the Australian arts funding landscape. These lectures (often delivered to third year cohorts) provide an overview of the mechanisms and infrastructure of funding for the arts and cultural sector and are designed as introductory sessions to help elucidate the complex nature of arts funding. Without fail, each time I have presented I have received follow-up requests from students for a career consultation of sorts. The nature of these conversations invariably take the form of the student having been surprised or overwhelmed by their own self-described naivety or ignorance in relation to the lecture content. When explored a little further, these students express a lack of confidence in their general knowledge relating to the business side of fine art practice. As these requests continued, I started to have an emerging sense of a gap in the minds of these students – that they were eager to fill – between what they aspired to know and what they did know in relation to the skills for supporting their creative practice beyond the university. Since my latest guest lecture (and its three accompanying follow-up consultations) I've been wondering about the veracity of this gap from the pedagogical perspective of the institution. I knew for certain that this content was being delivered, at least at an introductory level through my own limited involvement in delivering these lectures. This content was also presumably expanded upon in class discussions and in other educational formats beyond the lecture given. So what else were the students expressing an appetite for? Did the nature of their degree already include this content that they were somehow overlooking, or were they asking for additional content that was not included in their curriculum?

The second thread of curiosity has more recently emerged from my research into the concept of 'cultural enterprise' and how it's taught in creative degrees. Through this research I became familiar with the broader discourse of creative entrepreneurship. One branch of literature sets out to define the workers of the Creative Industry as 'cultural entrepreneurs' (Swedberg 2006; Taylor 2020). Another perspective to this discourse considers the entrepreneurial roles, natures and practices inherent to artists and art making, and how to harness them for entrepreneurial pursuits (Rivetti and Migliaccio 2021; Hale and Woronkowicz 2021; Arenius et al. 2021). A third perspective considers cultural entrepreneurship as the application of entrepreneurial knowledge to the profession of artistic practice (de Bruin and Noyes, 2021).

When considering the previous thread of curiosity from my conversations with students, I became primarily concerned with the latter area of this discourse. Through reviewing the literature of the intersection between entrepreneurial content and arts education (Toscher 2018), I learned of a recent American study in US higher education that investigated the response of higher education to an appetite for entrepreneurial coursework from art students (Simon 2021a). The study found that coursework relating to entrepreneurial and business skill training has been consistently in high demand over the past three years (Simon 2021b). Another study was conducted prior to this, that examined the pedagogical modes of delivery of 'arts entrepreneurship curricula' in American universities (Beckman 2007a). There is, however, controversy surrounding the integration of cultural entrepreneurship within fine art degrees because "many arts educators, arts students and practising artists find this prevailing commercial emphasis incongruent with their career values and therefore objectionable" (Bridgstock 2012:128). There is further some confusion among institutions, educators and students as to what constitutes 'arts entrepreneurship curricula'. Despite these objections and confusion, there remains a strong and widespread growth in appetite for this content (Beckman 2007b). Whilst similar studies have not yet been conducted in an Australian context, these findings are certainly consistent with what I'd been hearing anecdotally from conversations with Australian students.

Despite this appetite, however, research suggests that cultural entrepreneurship content is not consistently taught within fine arts higher education. Professor Ruth Bridgstock argues that "[t]he inclusion of entrepreneurship in undergraduate arts courses remains inconsistent and surprisingly minimal" despite a rise in the association between "creative work and economic growth" following the decade-old paradigm shift towards viewing the arts as a part of the larger Creative Industry (Bridgstock 2012:123). Bridgstock's clarification of the three types of arts entrepreneurship in higher education sheds light into the confusion of what constitutes entrepreneurship as art education previously articulated by Beckman. She notes Beckman's two critical distinctions between arts entrepreneurship as 'new venture creation' and arts entrepreneurship as 'being enterprising' and introduces a third type of arts entrepreneurship as 'employability and career self-management'. These distinctions, which Bridgstock acknowledges as sharing an overlap, echo again the sentiments expressed in consultations by anxious students and define more concisely the knowledge and skills the students feel they do not have an adequate grasp of.

The review of this literature in conjunction with its alignment with the previous thread of curiosity provoked more speculation. Bridgstock argues that "[e]ntrepreneurship is not a sub-topic within a business-related curriculum, but is a complex set of qualities, beliefs, attitudes and skills that underpins all areas of working life" (Bridgstock 2012:133). Artists are workers. Therefore, entrepreneurial knowledge, qualities, beliefs, attitudes and skills should be an intrinsic component of fine arts education. If so, how then do universities instil this education in fine art degrees across the country? If this type of material can be defined as curricula content, how does it then appear across fine art undergraduate degrees in Australia? Further, how thoroughly are these entrepreneurial skills being developed in fine art students? Is cultural entrepreneurship taught in parallel to a student's creative development? The culmination of these threads of curiosity compelled me to initiate a brief but dedicated investigation to answer some of these questions.

Study Design

Through this study I aimed to understand the scope of pedagogical approaches towards teaching entrepreneurial skills to fine art students in Australian higher education institutions. The investigation began with the following research question: 'Is arts entrepreneurial content included in the curricula of Australian fine art degrees?' To investigate the primary research question, an empirical study was thus designed to identify and analyse course content of fine art degrees to ascertain the extent of arts entrepreneurial content that is taught to fine art students. The conclusion of the study brought forth a compelling consequential research question: 'Is this content sufficient to support a student's transition from university to the sector as a practising artist?' The limitations and opportunities for pursuing this second research question are addressed towards the end of this paper.

Before commencing the study, I determined the qualifying parameters. Firstly, the type of institution that was included in this study was categorised as an Australian Public university whose fine art degree is taught out of a designated fine art or multi-disciplinary creative school.[2] From a total of forty-five institutions, only twelve qualified for this study. There was one forced inclusion, which was the National Art

[2] 'Multi-disciplinary creative school' is an encapsulating term used to refer to creative practice that is not only relegated to the visual arts. Such examples of creative practices that were accepted for this study included creative writing, performing arts, or music.

School due to it being Australia's only independent art school. The final list of thirteen institutions is outlined in Table 1.

State (and institutions)
NSW
National Art School
University of New South Wales
University of Wollongong
QLD
Griffith University
Queensland University of Technology
SA
University of South Australia
TAS
University of Tasmania
VIC
Federation University Australia
La Trobe University
Monash University
RMIT University
The University of Melbourne
WA
Curtin University

Table 1: List of institutions included in the study

Following this, the type of degree that would be included for evaluation was refined to a single undergraduate degree entitled 'Bachelor of Fine Arts' or with synonymous wording to similar effect (such as Bachelor of Visual Arts) – the proviso being that the degree was designed to prepare the student to become an arts practitioner at the completion of it. Throughout the study these degrees have since all been referred to as fine art degrees.

The data was collected from these institutions by identifying subjects from each of these degrees with content related to arts entrepreneurship. However, when initiating the search for data it became apparent that arts entrepreneurial terminology is not yet commonly reflected in course descriptions in Australian universities. Only one subject was found in the whole study that incorporated this terminology, which is a subject entitled 'Art Enterprise Workshop' (RMIT 2022). The encapsulating terminology used across most institutions was 'professional development'. As such,

data collection was achieved through broadening the key terms to include 'professional development' (and its synonyms) as well.[3] In the interest of consistency, all data collected was referred to as 'professional development'.

The type of content that was considered as 'professional development' was determined through a matrix of variables outlined in Table 2, where if at least one row was answered as 'yes', the subject was included in the study.

Variable	Yes	No
Did the subject title include the key terms?		
Did the subject description include the key terms?		
Did the Learning Outcomes include the key terms?		
Were a large selection of the following skillsets or areas of knowledge included in the subject description: Accounting, Asset building, Commercial acumen, Entrepreneurship, Funding, Insurance, Legal Considerations, Marketing/Communications, Networking, Social Impact, and Strategic Planning		
Were a large selection of the following skillsets or areas of knowledge included in the learning outcomes of the subject: Accounting, Asset building, Commercial acumen, Entrepreneurship, Funding, Insurance, Legal Considerations, Marketing/Communications, Networking, Social Impact, and Strategic Planning		
Were similar areas of non-art related skills and knowledge designed to support the entrepreneurial pursuits of creative practice noted in the subject description and/or learning outcomes?		

Table 2: Matrix for selecting subjects for inclusion in the study

The survey of subjects to identify key terms was limited to the course handbooks and subject descriptions of fine art degrees that are publicly available online. Across the thirteen institutions, a total of thirty-five subjects were identified.

There is an important disclaimer here that is relevant to the design of this research. It would be remiss to ignore the additional education that sits outside the scope of course curricula, which is that delivered by invested lecturers and tutors who provide their own advice and informal forms of professional development to their cohorts of students. Given that this research did not incorporate any form of qualitative data

[3] This study recognises that art practice, curatorial, and art history, theory and critique subjects are all necessary components of artists' professional development. However, this study looks specifically towards the professional development content that aligns with arts entrepreneurship definitions.

collection (such as interviews or case studies) this known and critical aspect of a student's education has not been included. It should however be acknowledged as a vital component of the delivery of cultural entrepreneurship education that students receive.

The Findings

With data in hand, the first point of analysis was to determine which of the thirteen institutions incorporate 'professional development' content in their fine art degrees. Figure 1 demonstrates this, as well a breakdown of how many of these subjects are offered by each institution:

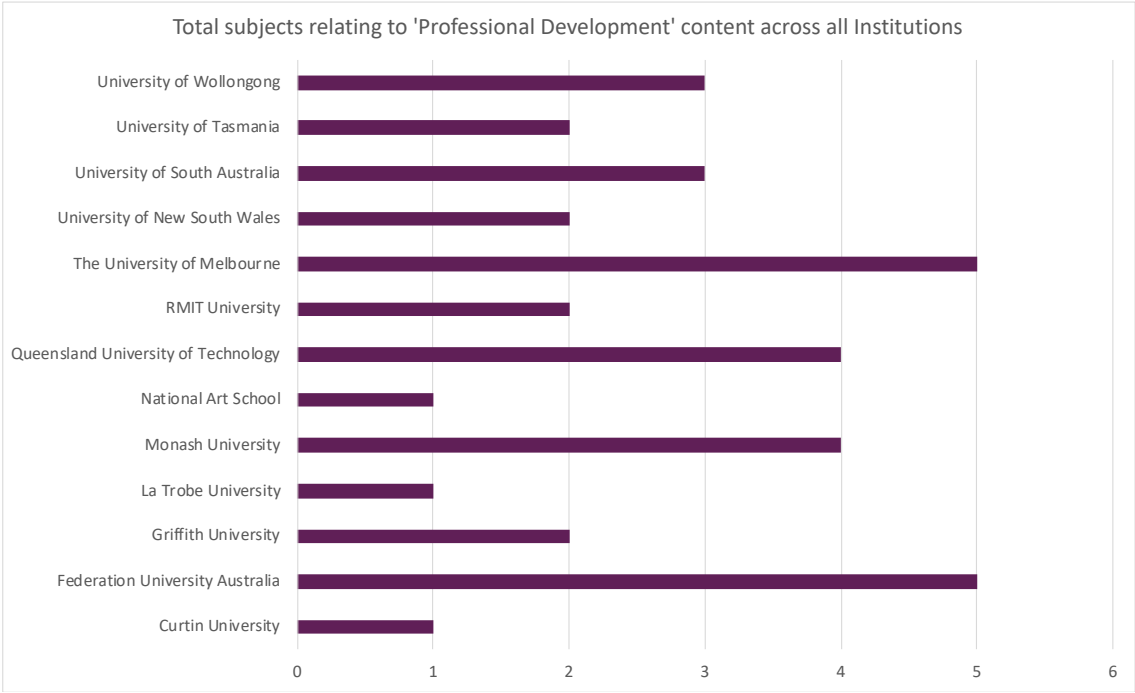

Figure 1: Total subjects relating to 'Professional Development' content across all Institutions

It is initially conclusive that professional development content is taught in at least one subject of a fine art degree across all thirteen institutions. Further, the institutions offered on average 2-3 subjects relating to professional development, with two institutions offering a maximum of 5 subjects. Notably, however, once the weighting of the credit points of these subjects as a percentage of the total credit points for a whole degree was considered, this range significantly expanded.

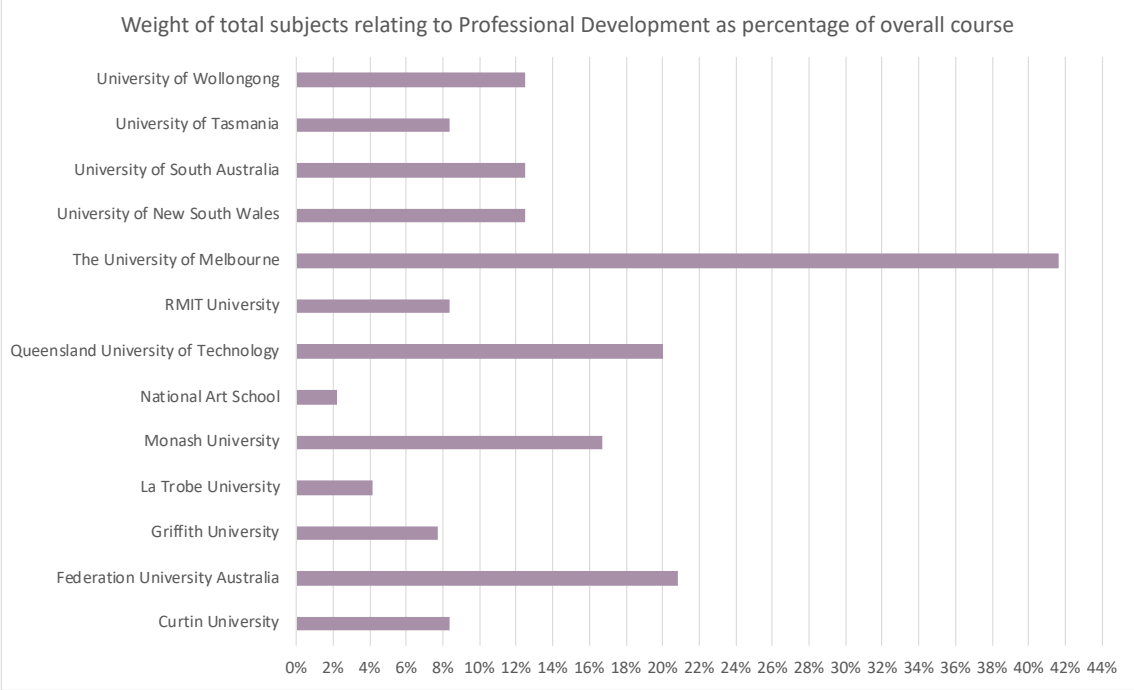

Figure 2: Weight of total subjects relating to 'Professional Development' as percentage of overall degree

As revealed by the graph in Figure 2, when this range of 1-5 subjects offered is examined it becomes apparent that not all institutions place the same weight on professional development content. The extent of professional development opportunities offered by the institutions ranges from 4% up until 42% (almost half) of the content of a fine art degree. Comparatively, the two institutions that both offered 5 subjects have placed separate weighting on these subjects, with one reaching a total of 21% of a degree, and the other 42% of a degree. Already the discrepancy between the pedagogical approaches towards incorporating this content into a fine art degree by each institution began to reveal itself.

To understand these differences further, the course content was examined from three further perspectives. Whilst all institutions included in this study do offer professional development content, the study examined the triangulation of these viewpoints to gain further insight into the prominence given to this content by each institution. The study determined: firstly, if there was a distinction between the way this content appeared across subjects, as either singled out as the sole focus of a subject or not; secondly, whether the content was taught as a theoretical or practical subject; and, finally, whether the content was demarcated as a compulsory component of a fine art degree, or not.

1. The way the content appears

In this first level of examination, a distinction appeared between the two different approaches to including professional development content in subjects. The first approach was that it was acknowledged as the sole purpose of the subject and all learning objectives related to professional development skill building. This took the form of subjects dedicated to professional development in the following ways:

- The subject had tangible outcomes and/or learning objectives towards professional practice, such as CV building[4], grant writing[5], building a 5-year career plan[6] or other outcomes relating to the areas of knowledge listed in rows 4-5 of Table 1.
- The subject description specifically noted the sole purpose or focus of the subject as professional development.

The second approach was to integrate professional development content as a component of other areas of study. This second type of subject was identified if:

- Only a small portion of the learning outcomes were specific to professional development outcomes.
- Professional development content was only listed as a component of the subject's overall description, with a separate topic being its broader focus.

These two distinctions in the types of subjects identified were categorised as either a 'Dedicated' subject or a subject with 'Integrated' content. As demonstrated in Figure 3 below, there is a relatively even split between how many of these two subjects are taught across this group of institutions, where 54% offer 'Dedicated' subjects and 46% offer 'Integrated' subjects.

[4] See for example Griffith University's third year subject, 'Professional Practices in the Visual Arts' (Griffith University n.d.).

[5] See for example National Art School's third year subject, 'Professional Studies Seminar' (National Art School n.d.).

[6] See for example University of South Australia's third year subject, 'Contemporary Art Career Development' (University of South Australia n.d.).

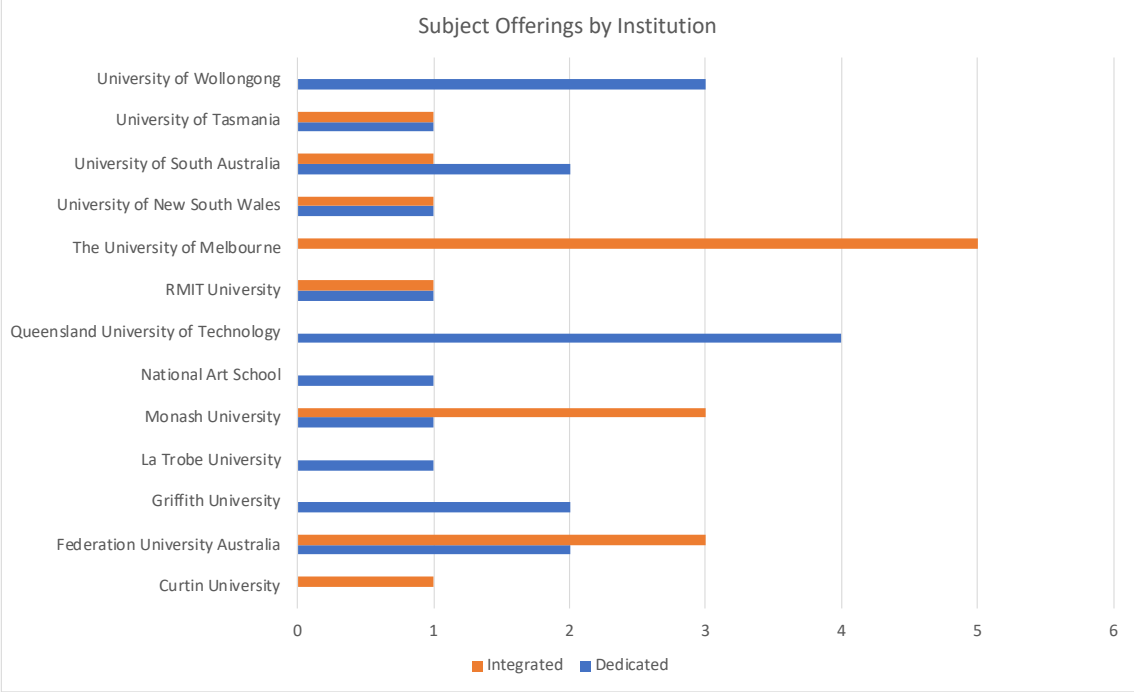

Figure 3: Total subjects offered by Institutions divided into the categories of 'Dedicated' or 'Integrated'

The top line understanding from this graph is that it offers an additional perspective for considering the pedagogical particularities that started to take form across these institutions. Only half (6) of the institutions in this cohort offered both ‘Dedicated’ and ‘Integrated’ subjects. Of the seven institutions that only offer one type of subject towards professional development, they were more likely to offer this content as a ‘Dedicated’ subject rather than as an ‘Integrated’ subject – five of them offer ‘Dedicated’ whereas only two offered ‘Integrated’ subjects. Only two institutions offer professional development content solely as integrated content. The pedagogical insight revealed here is that almost all institutions acknowledge that professional development content is at least worthy of attention as a single subject within a fine arts degree. However, there is a clear disagreement between the institutions as to whether or not this content is worth isolating and separating out from other subjects and dedicating an entire subject to. This notion of worth, however, cannot be evaluated by the data collected in this study as relevant factors (such as financial outlays) to designing, implementing and teaching a subject have not been considered. What can be understood is the confirmation of the previous statement that there is a clear distinction emerging between the pedagogical approaches of these institutions towards the prominence of professional development content for fine art students.

2. Theoretical or Practical

These pedagogical approaches were examined from a second perspective, this time with focus on the form that the subject took. The 'Dedicated' subjects were found to be designed in one of two ways: they were either offered as a theory subject much like the previously mentioned 'Art Enterprise Workshop', which is a dedicated workshop and theory-based subject offered in the third year of RMIT's fine art degree. The term 'theory' is broadly used here to encapsulate all forms of theory-based learning, including standard lectures and tutorials, professional seminars, workshops and other similar styles of classes relating to teaching professional development content as a system of ideas. An example of this is University of Wollongong's first year core subject 'Creative Communities' (University of Wollongong n.d.). This subject follows a traditional model of content delivery through lectures and activities designed to compound learning – such as the development of a CV or building social media profiles – facilitated through weekly tutorials and assessment tasks.

Otherwise, these subjects were found to be designed as an industry internship. The term 'internship' is used here to encapsulate all subjects relating to the student spending dedicated time with a host organisation external to the institution. These were also named as 'professional placement' or 'industry placement' subjects. Monash University's third year 'Fine Art Internship' is an example of such a subject (Monash University n.d.). This subject involves the (physical or virtual) placement of a student in a host organisation from within the cultural industry for equivalent of one day per week, over an approximate eight-week period. It also includes a schedule of preliminary seminars that are taught on campus to provide support with integrating learnings from the placements and assessment tasks.

Figure 4 reveals the comparison of the form that these subjects take across all institutions as a 'Dedicated' subject.

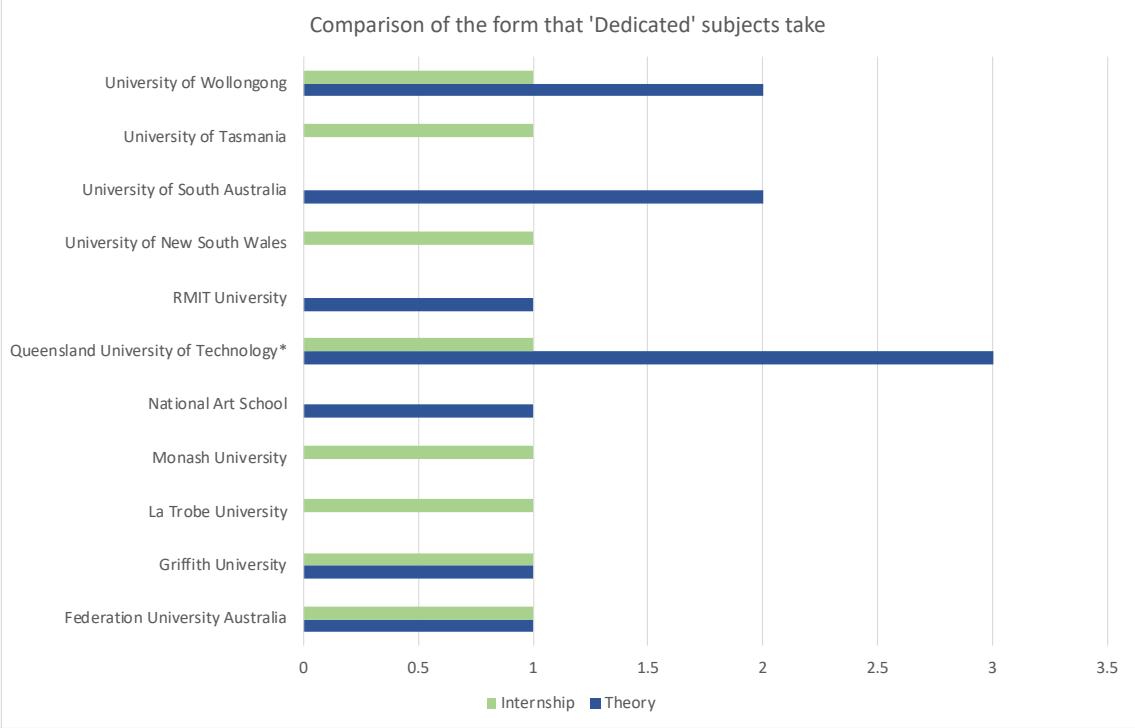

Figure 4: Comparison of the form that 'Dedicated' subjects take

As revealed by this graph, there was an even split amongst the institutions in the way they approached incorporating professional development content in fine art degrees. Whilst 58% of subjects took the form of theory style classes and workshops, the other 42% were designed as internships. Only four of the institutions included both subject offerings. Further, if the institution only offered one of these subject types, it was twice as likely that it was an ‘Internship’ rather than a ‘Theory’ subject focussed on professional development. All institutions that offered professional development as a ‘Dedicated’ subject offered it at least once within a degree, most often at third-year level. Only three institutions offered this content more than once, with Queensland University Technology offering this content at least once per year across all three years of full-time study.

However, the ‘Integrated’ subjects took a different form. Either professional development content was integrated into another theory-based subject focussed on general art and academic skills, such as Curtin University’s first year theory subject, ‘Academic and Professional Communications’ (Curtin University n.d.). Or, this content was integrated with studio practice subjects, predominantly offered at a third-year level, such as ‘Studio Art Practice 6’ from the University of NSW (UNSW n.d.). Figure 5 compares the form that these subjects take across all institutions as an ‘Integrated’ subject.

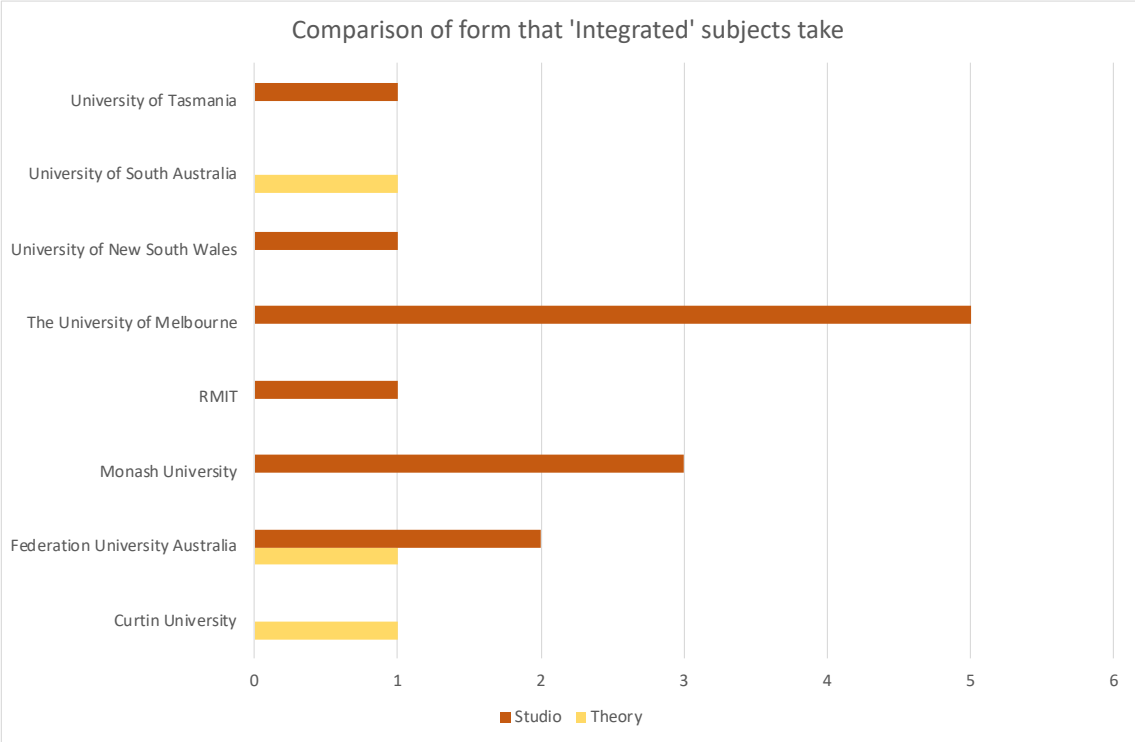

Figure 5: Comparison of the form that 'Integrated' subjects take

Figure 5 reveals a pedagogical preference for almost all institutions: 81% of 'Integrated' subjects were taught as a part of studio practice subjects, far outweighing the remaining 19%, which were taught as a component of theory (and often first year, generalised) subjects. Further, only one institution offered both forms of 'Integrated' professional development content. Despite this stark difference in the subject type, all institutions that offered professional development as an 'Integrated' subject followed the same trend of the 'Dedicated' subject and offered it at least once, also most often occurring at third year. There were two institutions who offered this content every year, with The University of Melbourne offering this content on more than one occasion per year. Notably, The University of Melbourne, Monash University and Queensland University of Technology all offer professional development content at least once per year. However, when considering Figure 3 in addition to Figures 4 and 5, we see Queensland University of Technology is the only institution that offered this content solely as dedicated subjects each year. Monash University offers only one of these subjects as a Dedicated subject (as an Internship subject), and The University of Melbourne offers all of these subjects as integrated subjects within studio practice. These discrepancies reveal a significant prominence given to professional

development content by Queensland University of Technology that is not shared by the other institutions.

3. Compulsory or Not

In narrowing the aperture of investigation to a final degree, a comparison between the prioritisation of these subjects within the course design was conducted. The comparison aimed to understand whether these subjects were offered as ‘Core’ content (and hence, compulsory) or as an ‘Elective’ (and hence, optional). Figures 6 and 7 shed light on whether ‘Dedicated’ and ‘Integrated’ subjects were offered as ‘Core’ or ‘Elective’ subjects to the students.

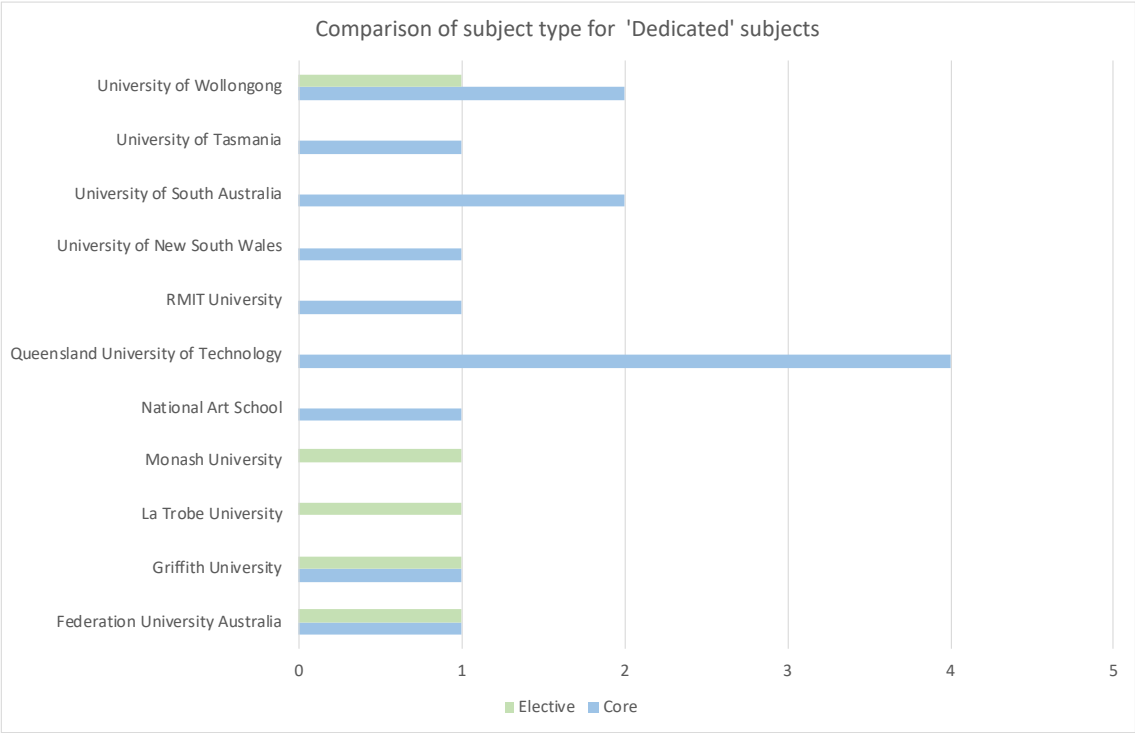

Figure 6: Comparison of subject type for 'Dedicated' subjects

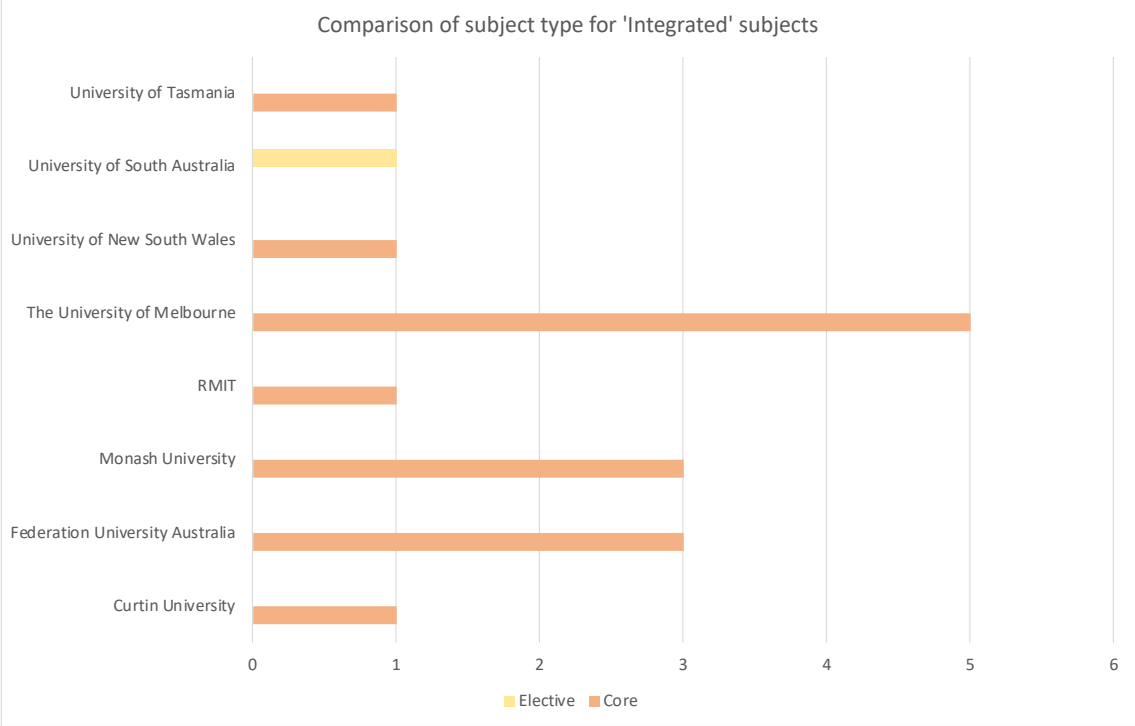

Figure 7: Comparison of subject type for 'Integrated' subjects

In an almost unanimous result, both ‘Dedicated’ and ‘Integrated’ subjects were almost always offered as ‘Core’ subjects. Whilst 71% of ‘Dedicated’ subjects were included as ‘Core’ subjects, 91% of ‘Integrated’ subjects were ‘Core’ subjects. Six institutions offered their professional development content as an elective, though it is notable that five of these institutions also offer ‘Core’ subjects as well. La Trobe University was found to be the sole institution who offered their professional development content as an ‘Elective’ but did not offer any ‘Core’ professional development subjects. This final component of the investigation implies that twelve out of thirteen institutions recognise professional development content as essential enough to an artist’s education that it is a mandatory component of a fine arts degree.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In responding to the primary research question, ‘Is professional development content taught in Australian fine art degrees?’, this study primarily reveals that all institutions included in this study do in fact teach professional development content to their fine art students, but to varying extents. The availability of this content ranges from 1-5 subjects within a degree but the weight of these subjects in relation to the overall course design ranges from 4%-42%. This content is delivered as either dedicated subjects or content integrated as components of other subjects, with an equal

distribution between the forms of a theory class or an internship/studio practice. Further, these subjects are offered as core subjects instead of electives across almost all institutions. Notably, the discrepancies between the prominence of professional development content across these institutions give rise to various interpretations of the necessity of professional development content to a fine arts education. With this data in hand, another research question is necessarily brought forth: Are these modes of delivery and varying levels of prominence of professional development content sufficient to support a student in their transition from university to sector in becoming a practising artist?

The results of this study suggest that professional development content is promoted in varying degrees as an essential component of a fine arts education. My anecdotal experience (when in conversation with students) suggests that this variation has resulted in students feeling ill-equipped, rendering this content as therefore insufficient. However, to answer this question from an empirical perspective, further research is required. The findings presented in this paper establish a cohesive foundation of evidence that support continued research. Listed here are suggested strategies for utilising the methodology and results of this study to support continued research into the effects of current professional development curricula on the confidence levels of fine art students to transition into practising artists.

Initially, the expansion of this study to incorporate all fine art degrees on offer from across all higher education institutions in Australia would be beneficial. What would these results look like when the methodology is amplified across 45+ institutions? Would the results remain consistent across a larger sample size? Would these found pedagogical particularities towards professional development content remain consistent? What would be further revealed?

To take this investigation further, research that incorporates qualitative data to ascertain the alignment between the teaching and learning experiences of this content would also be beneficial. Two factors could be considered for this research: The first being the level of satisfaction of current students and graduates with the professional development content they received. A longitudinal study is also recommended to ascertain whether the levels of confidence that students have in their knowledge and skillset upon graduation is congruent with the implementation of a sustained career. The second factor involves a qualitative research approach that includes university staff (particularly course coordinators, chief examiners, subject

coordinators, and sessional tutors alike) to gauge the full extent of professional development taught beyond that found in the course handbooks. Conversations from the live presentation of this paper to the ACUADS 2021 Conference suggested that many educators and university staff are engaged in this topic and have much to contribute to this research.

This additional research in conjunction with the findings presented here might help reveal a more direct response to the question of whether fine art students are sufficiently equipped to leave the university and cement their careers as professional, practicing artists. Should the findings of these results suggest students are not as equipped as they would like to be, the findings of this proposed research could also inform educators on how to approach meeting the expectations of students and practitioners to increase the prominence of professional development content within a fine arts education. In this way, the visibility of the bridge between university and sector could vastly improve for students, with a comprehensive skillset in hand to enter and navigate the challenges of the contemporary art sector.

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