Promoting diversity in creative arts education: The case of Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London

Annette Hayton, Polly Haste and Alison Jones

Introduction

Although Goldsmiths has a strong tradition of widening participation, as with other highly selective Art courses, students taking the Fine Art BA are mainly female, white and middle- class. Nationally, 72% of undergraduates taking Fine Art are female 63.7% in SEGs 1- 3 and 91.6% of students taking Fine Art are 'White'.

Recognising that the reasons for these divisions are complex and deeply rooted in the social, cultural and economic fabric of our society, we turned to Bourdieu to provide our theoretical framework and adopted a collaborative action research methodology to explore the issues; consciously setting out to transgress existing organisational and cultural boundaries and create a dynamic space designed to effect real and immediate change.

Working collaboratively academic staff and WP professionals agreed a programme of activities and a research model with two clear phases: 'Illuminate' a small-scale, qualitative Students as Researchers (SARs) project and a wider-reaching phase consisting of an online survey, interviews and focus groups. The complex interplay between personal and structural issues that affect progression to higher education were highlighted and we explore these under the following themes.

Fees, Finance and Employment

Fees were a common concern amongst students, which was linked to degree choice resulting in many preferring courses with a direct career path such as animation, or graphic design. Parental concern about employment was a significant factor in shaping their decision.

The impact of gender, ethnicity and class are significant in the field of fine art. In the UK, only 4 out of the 27 Turner Prize winners are women and only 3 are artists from BEM backgrounds. Nevertheless there are career opportunities within the creative arts

but our sample echoed the pragmatic decision-making processes described amongst working class students with students assuming a greater chance of securing a job by taking a vocational degree even though employers in the creative industries are more likely to opt for a broad degree from a 'better' university.

We explored this in discussions with our sample which resulted in the development of, new outreach activities to improve the knowledge base of local students about the careers opportunities that are available.

Fitting in

Our exploration of 'fitting- brought *habitus* as a theoretical concept into sharp focus as a practical issue. For example the highly selective nature of the Fine Art course meant that the tried and tested approach of a university visit was of limited value for some students, serving only to confirm their preconceptions of not fitting in. However, their experience with Goldsmiths student ambassadors offering a portfolio preparation workshop resulted in a more positive response. Even when differences in class and ethnicity exist, the similarities in age, interests and, in this case, in Art practice, can allow connections to be made which can overcome some of their concerns.

Qualifications and education

Some social groups have a culture of accessing certain forms of art through galleries and exhibitions that relate more closely to the formal expectations of education, privileging their cultural heritage above others. The significance of this particular form of knowledge in the development of academic and intellectual capital was highlighted through the research. Additionally we found that Goldsmiths art students were drawn from a limited number of colleges often taught by Goldsmiths alumni, allowing knowledge and expertise to be transferred between successful students, tutors and prospective applicants. Regardless of artistic potential, students from the participating colleges were struggling to compete in terms of academic and intellectual capital. As a result college staff focussed on developing strategies to enable their students to succeed, rather than on progression to highly selective courses.

The unequal starting point of some students was felt to be an urgent and pressing issue and in response Goldsmiths developed a Summer School providing a similar

pedagogical environment to the Fine Art BA to provide opportunities for developing the necessary academic and intellectual capital.

Applying to Goldsmiths

Very few students from the survey had applied, or would consider applying to Goldsmiths. In addition to practical reasons the competitive application process was seen as a real barrier and came up frequently in discussions with FE tutors concerned that their students might not be able to cope

In 'Art for a Few' Burke and McManus identified the admissions process itself as a critical factor and raised a number of difficult issues with which the Department of Art at Goldsmiths was willing to engage. As a result an interview preparation workshop was developed and run by an experienced member of the Goldsmiths Art Department who found that, despite having equal passion, commitment and skill, the students were highly unlikely to get through the first interview round. To address this imbalance it was agreed to trial a process in which all Lewisham applicants would be granted an interview. As a result, three out of four of the Lewisham College applicants were successful in gaining places on the BA Fine Art. This was the first time that any student from Lewisham College had been accepted on to the course and the first time, all of the Foundation Year students who applied were successful in gaining a place in higher education.

Conclusion

Universities have a significant part to play in widening participation through working with schools and colleges, developing fair admissions practices and providing a positive experience for all students

Goldsmiths Tutors report that the Fine Art BA has been enriched by the wider social and cultural mix of the students improving the learning experience for all students and staff. This demonstrates that Universities can benefit from diversity in the student body and it can be an important element in supporting excellence and fostering creativity.

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