

Heart of the matter

WHY ART SCHOOLS ARE WITNESSING A RENAISSANCE IN 2021

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When I was five, I wanted to be an artist. I dreamt of a future where I would have the luxury of spending hours in my sun-kissed studio – mixing paints, slathering colour onto large blank canvases, getting my fingers dirty, and generally enjoying every minute of every day of my chosen career. But somewhere along the way, that dream evaporated. Real life took over, and with it, I began to dream of more ‘realistic’ career options. I settled for a job in Finance, then switched tracks into Marketing, but I still harbour artistic ambitions, albeit of the occasional art project kind.

Today, however, the arts are seen as a more acceptable career ambition than when I was growing up. Art programmes are mushrooming at leading university campuses across the world, and a career in the arts is no longer seen as an unusual choice.

Getting Schooled in the Arts

According to Professor Steve Dixon, President of LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore, however, studying a niche discipline doesn’t necessarily mean a student will be restricted to that subject area.

“Arts graduates are resourceful, imaginative, entrepreneurial, and nimble,” he says.

“They flourish in many roles in non-arts industries because they’re innovative and independent thinkers, but also great team players and excellent communicators.”

As the world places higher value on resilience and adaptability, Professor Dixon notes art schools are seeing an uptick in students embracing the skills they can gain from an arts education, adding that in future economies, “artists and creative thinkers will have an increasingly important role to play across all industry sectors”.

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In the UAE, meanwhile, the American University in the Emirates (AUE) is a cultural hub in Dubai attracting students from not just the Middle East, but also Asia and Eastern Europe. Professor Abhilasha Singh, Vice President for Academic Affairs at AUE believes the arts give students a mode of self-expression.

"Due to external constraints by society, students want an outlet to explore creative industries where they can express themselves and not be constrained by formal



limitations," she says.

Columbia University, perhaps among the world's most well-known institutions, similarly has a burgeoning art school, which Dean of the university's School of Arts, Carol Becker, believes this has to do with access.

She adds many international students are drawn to the US' vibrant visual arts scene or come because their home countries do not have strong enough graduate arts programmes in their chosen areas.

Charting an Upward Course

While all six arts colleges agree there has been a noticeable uptick in interest for arts programmes, particularly among international students, the reasons behind their individual success vary.

"[Columbia's] School of the Arts has always had a large international population, for Filmmaking, Film Producing, Film and New Media Studies and Visual Arts in particular," says Dean Becker.

"While film is still mostly Los Angeles, there is a strong film industry in NYC as well. I think creative producing in film and producing for theatre is a great attraction to students from countries which do not teach producing."



Across the world at Yoobee Colleges, New Zealand's largest specialist creative and technology college, interest in the arts stems from programmes that marry creativity with technology, such as Web UX, Animation, Software Engineering, and Game Art.

"We are certainly seeing a big rise in students from Scandinavia where gaming and design industries are so prevalent, and more and more interest from Chinese students," says Ana Maria Rivera, CEO.

At Singapore's LASALLE, Professor Dixon says growth has continued at such a pace that

there are four eligible domestic applications per available place.

"With the creative industries in Asia on the rise, Singapore is one of the most dynamic, exciting, and accessible places in the world now for a student to immerse themselves in a rapidly evolving arts and cultural scene," he says.

Universities in the UAE and Taiwan are also faring well, with a diverse body of students for their arts programmes.

This international success, says Professor Singh in the UAE, is a result of students' desire to come to Dubai and experience the

cultural richness of the university, faculty, and the city.

"Our unique selling points are a culturally diverse group of students... interactive student activities that promote social awareness and wellness, as well as great placement opportunities," she says.

Meanwhile, at the National Dong Hwa University (NDHU) in Taiwan, the Department of Arts and Design, and the Department of Creative Arts and Industries attracts students from Japan, Russia, and even Iran, in addition to neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, but is achieving its recruitment through a different tack.

"We have not put much effort yet to attract international students, but we find that our advantage lies in two areas," says Professor Frances Hwei-Cheh Liu, Dean of the College of the Arts.

"The first is that we have faculties with international learning experiences graduated from renowned art schools or universities... The second feature is our natural environment, which is highly appreciated by students from the West who seek tranquillity for creation as well as varied outdoor activities in their student life."

Famous Faces on Campus

The increasing popularity of arts programmes has also been driven by the success of alumni, which include winners of prestigious prizes such as BAFTAs, Academy Awards, Nobel Prizes, and Pulitzer Prizes.

At Columbia, perhaps most well-known is the first female winner of the Best Director at the Academic Awards, Katherine Bigelow, director of the 2008 action film *The Hurt Locker*, and Jennifer Lee, writer-director of *Frozen*.

In addition, the school boasts an impressive roster of famous faculty, including playwright and screenwriter David Henry Hwang, *The New Yorker* magazine staff writer and theatre critic Hilton Als, Pulitzer Prize winning Richard Ford, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Orhan Pamuk, and sculptor and installation artist Sarah Sze.

Yoobee Colleges boasts film editor and BAFTA nominee Jabez Olsen who has worked on films like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies, *The Lovely Bones*, and as an additional editor for Steven Spielberg's *The Adventures of Tintin*. Jazz Thornton directed the multi-award-winning documentary *Jessica's Tree*, while Jeremy Kyle is an international artist that has

been commissioned by the likes of United Nations, *The New York Times*, The History Channel, and even the Chicago Bulls.

"I'm forever amazed by the sectors and jobs our Yoobee Colleges graduates go into," says Rivera.

"It serves as a constant reminder that the creative industry is much bigger than most people think."

At LASALLE, alumni include Musical theatre star Elena Wang, who made her London debut in *The King*, filmmaker Boo Junfeng, the first Singaporean invited to screen at the Cannes Film Festival's International Critics' Week in 2010 with his debut feature film *Sandcastle*, and award-winning singer, songwriter, and actor Kit Chan, Singapore's most successful musician with over a million album sales. In the design realm, collective PHUNK, have creatively collaborated with The Rolling Stones, Levis, Nike, Rolls Royce and G-Shock.

Noteworthy AUE alumni Ameni Esseibi and Mina Ghasimi are creating waves nationally and internationally. Esseibi appeared on the cover of *Cosmo Magazine* and is the Arab world's first plus-sized model encouraging body positivity and female empowerment, while Ghasimi has established her own fashion brand, Vega La Mode.

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The Pandemic Effect

Yoobee's Rivera admits that while there's been a surge of interest in arts programmes over the past few years, 2020 saw declines.

"Border closures, lockdown, and crowd restrictions saw many parts of the creative sector struggle, including international recruitment," she explains.

"But by the end of the year many parts of our creative industry were experiencing a rapid recovery as the country's successful management of COVID-19 presented not only

new opportunities, but new ways of working together."

Nearby, the University of Auckland in New Zealand also saw a u-shaped recruitment trend, particularly, in its Bachelor of Design and Bachelor of Fine Arts programmes.

Professor Diane Brand, Dean of Creative and Performing Arts, says international numbers are steadily growing even in 2021, despite the country's border closures.

"We performed exceptionally well in teaching and supporting students remotely and this

seems to have enhanced our reputation in the education marketplace," she says.

At the same time, while the pandemic has disrupted global mobility, it's also helped push a radical shift in the way students are thinking about their careers, and Professor Brand says it has increased interest in arts programmes.

"COVID-19 seems to have led people to recognise that creativity is an important part of a balanced life and a way of healing trauma and dealing with stress," she says.

"Some students clearly have decided to study subjects that give them a sense of personal satisfaction in their careers as opposed to a less interesting path that will pay well."

Columbia's Dean Becker agrees, adding during the periods in which people were confined at home, they had time to think.

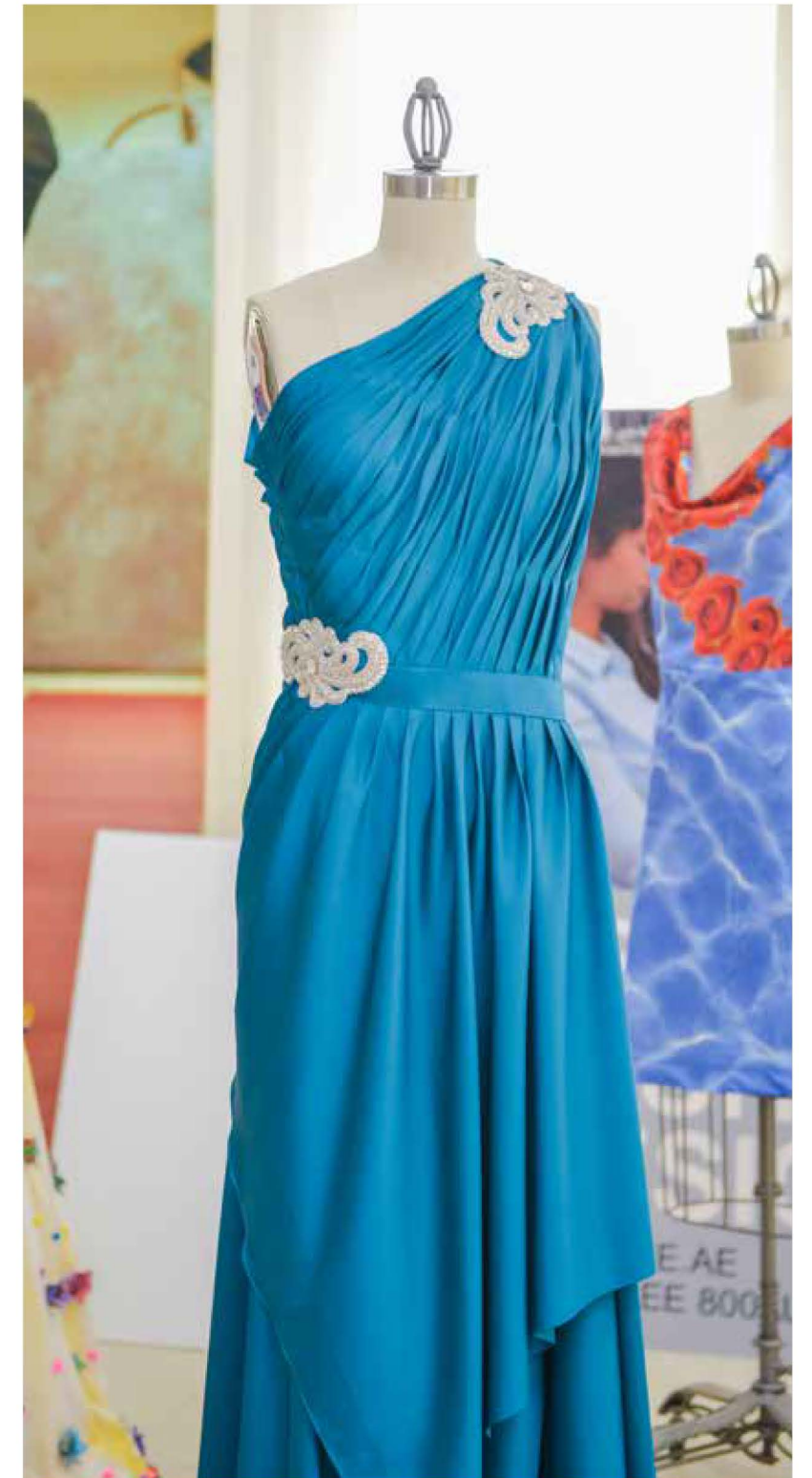
"Some decided they wanted to be writers, others that they wanted to make film, some that they had always wanted to be playwrights," she tells QS.

"People are thinking with their hearts more and deciding that a truly creative life is what they most want."

The provision of online, however, does not necessarily translate to graduates' output, and Dean Liu at NDHU, takes a slightly pessimistic view. Speaking with QS, she says the pandemic has seriously impacted the performing arts communities, owing to the necessary ban on mass gatherings.

"Many artists have suffered from no income and were forced to seek alternatives to survive," she says.

"This cruel reality surely will have an impact on young people when they are faced with a decision for their career."



COVID-19 and Beyond...

Professor Dixon at LASALLE believes the impetus for an arts education in a post-pandemic world seems to be changing needs and the desire to find ways to cope.

"The pandemic has made people reflect more and more on existential issues and their personal quality of life and turning to different forms of arts, whether as consumers or as hobbyists and practitioners, is something that many have done to find stimulation, solace and inspiration," he says.

"In the future economy, artists and creative thinkers will have an increasingly important role to play across all industry sectors. Many of our graduates are leading arts and design figures, but many others have applied their creative skills successfully across numerous other sectors."

Professor Singh of the AUE agrees. Based on current trends in the market, she foresees an increase in Liberal Arts programmes because of the creative industries flourishing in the region. She says students are committed to the creative professions because it gives them the ability to express their thoughts and frustrations in a productive and creative manner.

Owing to the ability to conjoin both the University of Auckland's

leading programmes, the BDes and BFA with 11 other degrees, Professor Brands says fine arts and design now make a significant part of a transdisciplinary education.

"Employers are now looking for job candidates with creativity as it is widely recognised in business and industry that these skills provide a competitive edge," she says.

Moreover, Professor Brand feels the responsibility to promote the arts lies with governments and authorities.

"We should be increasing the liberal arts and creative arts offerings to all students to deliver an all-round education for a resilient 21st century citizen," she tells QS.

"However, governments overseas are doing the reverse and locking these disciplines out of funding which will in the long run diminish the breadth of education of future students and be detrimental to society in general."

With the world going on a collective pause as of 2020, there's been a rethink of what constitutes a good, durable, long-term career; free from the shocks brought about by market fluctuations or economic peaks and troughs.

Consequently, many are choosing to follow their heart and fulfil the secret ambition of their inner child. ❖

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