ABSTRACT

The paper begins with an overview of the changing remit and constituency of the Art & Design Benchmark Statement and its strengths and weaknesses in this regard.

The appropriateness of the Statement is evaluated through a mapping exercise for a mainstream subject area within art & design - graphic communication. Since the generalised, flexible approach of the Art and Design Benchmark makes the mapping exercises uncontroversial, this section is brief, serving mainly as an endorsement of the appropriateness and acceptability of the Statement.

The paper then considers the more complex proposed function of the Benchmark as a ‘prompt for self-critical reflection and further development’ (Jackson, 2001). This section is informed by a series of interviews with full-time and part-time academic staff on a Graphic Communication degree programme.

The conclusion briefly considers ways in which engagement with and usage of the Benchmark Statement might be encouraged within the traditionally autonomous sector of art and design.

The focus throughout has been on the Art & Design Benchmark Statement.

The BA Graphic Communication course I intend to consider is in the Cardiff School of Art & Design within the new university sector. The School has a long history of art and design provision, excellent student retention rates (95%) and a research rating of 4.
BENCHMARK STATEMENT OVERVIEW

Unless otherwise stated, quotes are taken from an interview on 6.03.02 with Tim Coward who was one of the panel members for the Art & Design Benchmark Statement. Information about other interviewees can be found at the end of the paper.

The Art & Design (A&D) Benchmark Statement was produced during the second benchmark phase by a panel whose members, despite holding management-level posts, remain closely involved with the subject and who brought with them experience of a range of different types of institutions and courses.

At the time of the phase 2 briefings, the QAA’s approach was perceived to have ‘softened considerably’. The emphasis was ‘no longer on standardisation’ but instead the Panel was charged with writing a benchmark statement which would be ‘as widely acceptable as possible to the subject sector’ in order to ‘promote ownership for the statement within the subject community’.

The determination with which the Panel undertook this task is undeniable: aims and objectives from all art & design subject documents in the UK were checked to ensure that the Benchmark Statement was a true reflection of current practice and a highly generalised approach was taken in an attempt to embrace as many of the 280 UCAS-listed sub-sections of art & design as possible. The detailed feedback received from 21 institutions was generally highly supportive of the flexible, non-prescriptive nature of the document.

In this regard, it is significant that several institutions voiced concerns about the different approach taken by the (officially) related History of Art, Architecture and Design (HAAD) Benchmark Statement. The problem of using more than one Benchmark Statement was discussed by the A&D Panel who ‘argued vigorously’ but unsuccessfully that the A&D and HAAD Statements should not be published under a single cover. Their position is clarified in the Joint Preface produced by the two panels. The difficulties facing courses attempting to reflect more than one benchmark statement is likely to be particularly pertinent for the art & design sector which aspires to integrate theory/practice to varying degrees.

At first the target audience for the benchmark statements included employers, prospective applicants, parents, students and subject providers. This was perhaps an over-ambitious and inappropriately broad target. The current lack of QAA involvement in course validation and review, and uncertainties in terms of its future role in subject reviews has also changed expectations about the intended readership for benchmark statements. As it stands, the Art & Design Benchmark Statement seems primarily to address subject providers, attempting simply to describe the everyday reality.

The mapping exercise which follows reveals how thoroughly and expertly the initial remit of acceptability has been delivered. Responses from lecturing staff
confirm that the Benchmark Statement genuinely reflects the reality of art &
design education in the UK:

‘The Benchmark Statement is pragmatic...I was cheered by the care taken
in the wording so that it didn’t confine any activity.’ (Interviewee A)

‘I was expecting the worst, very dry and abstract, but I could relate to it. I
thought, “I could sign up to something like this”.’ (Interviewee B)

As an agreed baseline accepted by all subject providers, the Art & Design
Benchmark can be used as a checklist for new courses, or during periodic
reviews. Its usefulness beyond that is as yet untested.

COMPARISON & EVALUATION

The BA Graphic Communication course (BAGC) is in its fourth year and has just
undergone a successful periodic review. Currently there are 140 students on the
course, studying a broad curriculum which covers word-, image- and time-based
graphic communication. The emphasis is on the designer as communicator
rather than salesperson, and on the inter-relationship of theory and practice. The
Art & Design Benchmark Statement was used as a simple checklist in
preparation for the recent review but had not otherwise informed the programme
or its delivery. The Review Panel recommended that a more in-depth
consideration be given to the Statement to aid course development. To some
extent this paper has begun that process.

The comparisons/evaluations which follow use the headings suggested by the
LTSN guide.

B.S. PROGRAMME AIMS & OUTCOMES

The Benchmark Statement has a principle aim: ‘to prepare students for
continuing personal and professional development’. This is broken down into two
general aims, five subject-specific and four professional aims. The emphasis is
on the generation of ideas (concepts/proposals/solutions/ arguments) and the
production of material outcomes. The outcomes are informed by an
understanding of media, process, visual language and the context (cultural,
economic, political etc.) in which they will be read.

In addition, eleven generic (transferable) aims are listed, most of which are
expected to be integral to the subject curriculum. The generic skills are
particularly focussed on the ability of students to be independent and articulate
learners, both self-critical and self-reflective.

BA Graphic Communication  High correlation
The aims and outcomes of the BAGC programme correspond directly to the general, subject-specific and professional aims expressed in the Benchmark Statement. They are, however, couched in rather different terms in the Course Document (which was written when an alternative set of buzz-words held sway) and are separated out in the Programme Specification which follows QAA guidelines. This structural and linguistic difference makes comparisons somewhat opaque for those outside the loop. An agreement on terminology (and function), at least for QAA-related art & design documentation, would solve this problem.

A similar difficulty arises with the Benchmark Statement’s generic aims. These use categories and terminology in a way which does not accord with current practice at UWIC. Nonetheless, and despite some variations in emphasis, there is a clear correspondence between the Benchmark aims and those of the course.

The only significant variation is in the non-appearance, in this section of the Benchmark Statement, of the word ‘creativity’. ‘Imagination’ appears in relation to materials and processes and it could perhaps be argued that creativity is implied by many of the aims. Within the BAGC programme aims & outcomes the term ‘creativity’ is frequently used, in relation to aims, outcomes and assessment (performance) criteria. Since the concept is so firmly linked at the assessment stage to normative judgement rather than criterion referencing, it can be a site of dispute. For example, questions were raised during our recent periodic Review about the teaching and assessment of creativity and about the ‘problem’ of subjectivity. It would have aided the subsequent debate if the centrality of creativity within art and design education had been discussed within the Statement.

**B.S. CURRICULUM & CONTENT**

This section of the Benchmark Statement is brief. Guidelines suggest that curriculum design should ensure subject coherence, support individual development, encourage independent learning and aid professional development. It is suggested that contextual studies can be an integrated and/or separate field of study within courses. The reference to the use of collaborative projects and sustained periods of independent study, though appropriate to art and design education perhaps belongs in the Learning & Teaching (L&T) methodologies section.

**BAGC No detailed comparison possible**

The BAGC course accords with these minimal guidelines. More detail would be inappropriate given the diversity of programmes in this subject sector.

**B.S. LEARNING, TEACHING & ASSESSMENT METHODS**
The Benchmark Statement provides a description of the range of L&T methods employed in art and design. These are characterised by diversity, integration and student-centred independent learning. In a rare moment of evaluation the Benchmark affirms that ‘a clear strength’ (of the learning environment) ‘is the development of students’ independent learning skills’.

It was also heartening to read that the purpose of assessment is as ‘a positive learning tool’. This was a useful correction to a perceived tendency of the QAA to prioritise assessment as a measuring device - an approach which accords with the use of Benchmark Statements as regulatory systems but which seriously undermines the value of education for its own sake. The Statement also stresses the importance of oral and written feedback and the need to encourage ‘a deep approach to learning’.

**BAGC High correlation**

All the methodologies and strategies outlined in the Benchmark Statement are utilised on the BAGC course. Had they not been, and had the course team not been familiar with the methodologies (through ILT membership and experience), it is unclear how the Benchmark could have been used to extend/improve the methods used. The lack of detail and of evaluation makes any follow-up problematic. A more analytical approach would encourage discussion; a consideration of levels of learning outcome such as SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) Taxonomy (Biggs, 1999), for example, and an overview of how students learn would be useful and appropriate given the importance of independent learning in art & design education.

**B.S. STANDARDS & LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT**

Standards and levels of achievement are expressed as Learning Outcomes and are a restatement of the Benchmark aims and outcomes. They are deliberately broad, allowing scope for interpretation. Such breadth and flexibility is likely to extend the applicability of the Benchmark in general, but lessen its usefulness at course/programme level where more specificity is required.

**BAGC High correlation**

Although emphasis varies, there is a high correlation between the BAGC programme outcomes and the Benchmark Statement programme outcomes. Two outcomes which are implicit in the BAGC course are made explicit in the Statement. These are: ‘the ability to accommodate change and uncertainty’ and ‘the identification of personal strengths and needs’. Both are to some extent subsumed within other BAGC programme outcomes, the former as part of the process of problem-solving which requires constant evaluation and re-evaluation, experimentation and risk-taking; the latter is an aspect of studentship.

Although problems may result from setting up learning situations which specifically foster an ability to accommodate change and uncertainty (insecurity
and paranoia for example) this ability is almost a pre-requisite for professional
work and its emphasis within the Benchmark Statement is highly appropriate.
Similarly, the identification of personal strengths and needs is a central aspect of
independent learning. By highlighting these abilities as programme outcomes the
Benchmark Statement has encouraged discussion within the BAGC course. The
course team may subsequently decide to make such abilities more explicit within
the BAGC course documentation and delivery.

OVERALL EVALUATION

The strengths of the Benchmark Statement in Art & Design derive from its
authors’ understanding of the sector in all its variety. This understanding has
resulted in a paper which is appropriate in scope and emphasis, which is
generalist enough to embrace all sub-sections of art & design, and flexible
enough to allow subject providers to ‘do what they want to do within minimal
constraints’ (Coward, 2002). The fact that the Statement is emphatically non-
prescriptive and that the principles it expounds are broad-based will help ensure
acceptability and thus a sense of ownership.

Whether ‘ownership’ will be passive or active depends in no small part on the
extent to which institutions actively support Benchmark Statements and the ways
in which schools are encouraged to engage with their subject statement. Support
and even enthusiasm may exist at institutional or school level but may be
overtaken by more pressing priorities - issues of disability or resourcing for
example. This will be further considered in the next section.

However, there are aspirations beyond the remit of ownership and acceptability.
The reassessment of the function and interpretation of Benchmark Statements
has been particularly encouraged by the LTSN. Norman Jackson of LTSN
suggested that benchmark statements could provide:

. a prompt for self-critical reflection and further development
. a stimulus to reflection
. a starting point for discussion and reflection within teaching teams.

and quoted from a QAA publication which affirmed that

‘the benchmark statement should promote professional dialogue about the
educational outcomes of a programme between those responsible for
designing, delivering, assessing and assuring programmes’ (Jackson,
2001)

The potentials and possibilities described above were raised in a series of six
interviews with academic staff in the School of Art & Design at UWIC. Lecturers
teaching on the Graphic Communication degree were interviewed since they had
recently undergone a Periodic Review and were therefore assumed to be familiar
with the Benchmark. Questions, which were provided in advance of the informal
interview, were intended to ascertain how the Benchmark related to existing
‘prompts’ to debate and reflection and (albeit within a very small sample group) to
what extent the Benchmark Statement was felt to be of value as an aid to pedagogic practice.

INTERVIEWS

For purposes of confidentiality, interviewees are referred to as ‘A’, ‘B’ etc.

Interviewees’ responses have been edited to focus on the following issues:
. acceptability and purpose of the Benchmark Statement
. functionality, with the emphasis on its use as an aid to critical reflection
. relationship to current methods of prompting debate
. suggestions for extending the usefulness of the Benchmark Statement although the discussions invariably ranged beyond (and between) these specifics.

Not unexpectedly, the interviews revealed that the Benchmark Statement was, in itself, generally acceptable.

‘It was reassuring to discover that what I was doing and the course was doing fitted the parameters.’ (C)

However, there was some initial confusion and concern about its purpose and how it might be used:

‘I’m in the dark about what the Benchmark Statement is and how it should develop in art and design. Are we being told it’s a Number 10 directive, or desirable, or a discursive tool...do we all have to sign up for it?’ (B)

Those members of staff who had experience of the limiting prescriptions of GNVQ courses were anxious that the Benchmark Statement might be used to curtail options:

‘There’s a problem of fitting things into inappropriate categories, of standardisation. Diversity is a good thing.’ (D)
‘I have a notion that the Benchmark Statement is intended to compare our students with others via a measured lowest common denominator. This is not appropriate to the kinds of things we do at this level.’ (C)

The difficulty of measuring quality as opposed to quantity was also emphasised by the majority of interviewees:

‘Intellectual processes are difficult to measure in a simplistic way.’ (C)
‘What we are trying to measure is unmeasurable - it’s bound to be an inexact science.’ (A)
These concerns about comparative measurements relate to comparisons across the sector rather than those made within a single course in order to determine degree classifications. The latter at least offers a standard experience against which to measure student achievement whereas the variation within the art and design sector, or even between one graphic course and another, is vast. Most staff felt that it would be helpful to have a quality standard but considered that, given the diversity of the sector, valid comparisons could not be made via the Benchmark Statement.

Reference was made to the old CNAA system of peer-review, which, despite perceived shortcomings (of bias and variable quality of judgement) was generally held in high regard. External examiners were also seen as having the potential to set and maintain standards across courses, although recent curtailment of their remit was believed to have lessened this potential somewhat.

Unease about externally produced/imposed standards (other than via peer-evaluation) was a general one. Interviewees stressed the need for the Benchmark Statement to be non-prescriptive, able to change in response to continuing debate, local circumstances and a changing educational context. The Benchmark Statement could be

‘one of the few top-down initiatives that might have educational value (but) if it’s not kept live it will become insignificant. An ongoing mechanism is required for input by those with an interest - staff, employers, students.’ (B)

Although the generalised nature of the Benchmark Statement was held to be appropriate, it was also seen as limiting its function:

‘I’m not criticising the Benchmark Statement but it’s so vague, it doesn’t tell me how to improve, just says that what I’m doing is OK.’ (C)

This combination of high acceptability and low perceived functionality was not entirely universal. One member of staff, who cited her lack of a formal teaching qualification as significant,

‘found the Benchmark Statement very helpful. It made me question what I do, maybe prioritise things differently’ (E)

but in general, and even for the interviewee quoted, other prompts for discussion and development were invariably used in preference to the Benchmark Statement.

Although this preference doubtless relates to familiarity, at least in part, questions about the function of the Benchmark Statement tended to give rise to questions about the problem, if any, it is intended to solve. Although staff frequently voiced
a desire for designated time for pedagogic debates, they were not convinced that further prompts were required beyond the existing complex of module evaluation, student feedback, course committee meetings, staff meetings, staff/student meetings, annual course reports, external examiner reports, colleagues and conference attendance et al. They were also uncertain whether an additional text was the most appropriate aid, given that the course document already provides focussed and detailed information covering both principle and practice and which is constantly revisited and modified in response to the prompts already listed.

Asked in what ways debate and critical reflection were encouraged in their professional lives, all interviewees prioritised ongoing informal and formal discussions among and beyond the course team. These ranged from semi-formal ‘post-mortems to evaluate how a module has worked - on a personal level and a course level, and how the students respond’ (E) to the everyday ‘whenever we get together, it’s literally just talking about how we operate’. (A) Discussion with colleagues is highly valued, both because of their experience, which aids evaluation of ideas and suggestions, and because the discussion tends to focus on problem-solving. Proposals can be easily ‘tested’, re-evaluated, modified and applied. This factor is probably of particular significance for the practice-led, practitioner-taught art and design sector. Unless the precepts of the Benchmark Statement can be tested through debate and practical application it seems likely to remain a peripheral paper exercise.

‘When I read it first I thought that’s not really what I’m interested in, that’s not what I’m about - I’m about being in the studio making things.’ (E)

‘I’ll get interested if I see it working; I prefer to have it demonstrated.’ (D)

All interviewees reported a healthy level of debate within the course but none felt that the Benchmark Statement had significantly informed or extended the quality of that debate.

‘The Benchmark Statement is confirming rather than challenging. Perhaps it can’t do more than that; there’s such a broad spectrum of areas, how can it challenge the particularities?’ (F)

It is regarded merely as an adjunct to the course document, an extension of the external examiners’ remit or simply as ‘yet another’ QAA requirement. Though viewed as benign, it is not currently seen by the staff at course level as contributing significantly to professional development or critical reflection.

There was no disagreement among those interviewed about the necessity of debate and the importance of sharing good practice,

‘we could be teaching a lot better if we debated more’. (E)
There was also an appreciation that individual experiences (of healthy and supportive debate) might not be universal:

‘if there aren’t external examiners asking you to do things, and if course dialogue isn’t such that the course itself is asking you to do things, then a document like this (the Benchmark Statement) would be quite useful’. (F)

None of the interviewees, however, felt that the Benchmark Statement as currently constituted would provide a significant prompt or support.

‘I don’t see the Benchmark Statement providing that. It gives no indication about what you do with it. [For example] it might mention the theory and practice link but then doesn’t suggest questions or ways in which you might explore what you understand by it.’ (F)

This problem of functionality, initially caused by the non-prescriptive qualities which make the Benchmark Statement acceptable, is felt by interviewees to have been exacerbated by the lack of a clear explanation, agreed by all interested parties, of what the document is intended to achieve.

If it is intended to be central to course and staff development then users first need to be convinced that there is a need for an additional text. Similarly, if it is to be a prompt to debate and reflection, it needs to be shown that there is insufficient debate at present (and this is not the experience at UWIC). If the intention is to formalise and focus that debate then the Benchmark Statement needs to move beyond a general, honest description of the sector towards informative evaluation - not just ‘what’ but ‘why’ and ‘how’.

Those interviewees who are members of the ILT invariably drew comparisons between the Benchmark Statement and texts from the A&D LTSN and other pedagogic sources which were found to be more stimulating and in-depth, frequently suggesting, explaining and evaluating practical solutions to problems - of assessment for example - which had subsequently been tried out by staff:

‘I read it, I do it, I test it on others, then I revisit it in the light of that experience.’ (E)

Regardless of its perceived function/s, the Benchmark Statement is not seen as being particularly relevant to current educational concerns. Paperwork abounds; however, a clear rationale for its use as an aid to improving learning and teaching is less frequently available:

‘staff wouldn’t want to (get involved) unless it was purposeful. We need clear guidelines about how and why staff should use it’ (the Benchmark Statement). (F)
‘It’s all about relevance. We need an away-day to explain it.’ (E)

Despite such reservations, the majority of interviewees agreed that the Benchmark Statement provides an opportunity for development which should not be missed. In part, the desire to make the Benchmark Statement work seems to come from a sense of impending crisis in the sector, brought on by rising student numbers, reductions in staff, resources and teaching time, and the pressures resulting from ‘external’ requirements such as disability legislation and QAA demands.

‘These are important debates - how can you deliver the same quality with fewer hours? It’s vital we share good practice but we’re always going at 100 mph, there’s no time to reflect.’ (C)

Within the context of these anxieties, staff are concerned that a pragmatic ‘needs must’ response is likely to be

‘the factor that forces the debate’ (A)

and that the educational concerns of the Statement are not likely to be prioritised. Interviewees’ suggestions for helping to ensure the viability of the Benchmark Statement vary considerably.

There are noticeable differences of opinion regarding the need for an additional text. Some responses were strongly affirmative:

‘you have ambitions, opinions, views, but if you don’t have a text you’ve got nothing to respond to. A text provides a static point, a lever for change, something to move beyond.’ (B)

Other more negative replies reflect a (perhaps universal) sense of being awash with paper, and an anxiety that in prioritising the process of learning and teaching we could lose sight of the content of what is being taught, of our own subject. The primacy of the course document was consistently affirmed; staff are sceptical about the usefulness of the recently conceived programme specification document, and all are concerned about what they perceive as a growing tendency to purposeless duplication of information in marginally different formats.

When staff were asked what was missing from existing texts (including the Benchmark Statement), their responses included;

• more in-depth information about major learning and teaching issues eg. methods of delivery and assessment, and strategies for encouraging independent learning;
• a lecturers’ glossary, evaluating different learning & teaching methodologies and strategies;
• suggestions for further reading.
There was also a desire for provocative or challenging questions to be included. These would be specifically used to stimulate debate and reflection, for both individuals and groups. Also, although the difficulty of making the Benchmark Statement specific was acknowledged, there was a strong sense that the document will only be truly effective if it can adapt to local needs and circumstances. This can be achieved in part if the focus is on teaching and learning issues within art and design. Details of curriculum and delivery would then remain in the local domain. Clearly, however, this would change the nature of the Benchmark Statement and perhaps solve one problem only to raise others.

LTSN publications are beginning to fill some of the perceived gaps with an excellent range of pragmatic, well-argued and well-informed booklets. Research could usefully be undertaken to ascertain the extent to which these are being used within Schools and courses.

Regardless of the content of the Benchmark Statement, interviewees are convinced that

‘it will only encourage debate if there are formal mechanisms and structures to make it come to life. It’s not the piece of paper, it’s what happens after that’s important.’ (C)

Schools/faculties and institutions are expected to take the lead in this regard, although there was an appreciation that different institutions are likely to be at different stages of development in relation to the Benchmark Statement. At UWIC, an impending QAA visit has encouraged a broad review of subject delivery but also taken the focus away from the relatively recent initiative of Benchmark Statements.

‘...while obviously being part of the QAA process, the Benchmark Statement is not the most urgent priority for our School at the moment...there are more pressing issues linked to the QAA Codes of Practice that we need to address. You can’t progress on all fronts, because it becomes too much for the staff to take in and deal with, given existing demands and activities on a day-to-day level. You have to have priorities.’ (F)

Progress in ensuring active ownership and maximum use of the Benchmark Statement is likely to be hindered while decisions about how it is used, over and above course validation and review, remain primarily a matter for individual institutions. Currently there is no official forum to ensure that good practice is shared, although the LTSNs are beginning to encourage debate on a voluntary level. This issue was raised by a number of interviewees who suggested that the Benchmark Statement needed to be used to stimulate broader debate, possibly through subject-specific conferences. A majority believed that external
recommendations for its use, if clear, appropriate and achievable, could help ensure a sense of broad ownership and encourage professional discussion across and within institutions. This in turn would keep the issues raised by the Benchmark Statement 'live' and encourage academic staff to view it as a working document.

These aspirations can be realised, however, only if the Benchmark Statement’s content is extended and remains current, as previously discussed. Strongly-held views were expressed about the necessity for the Benchmark Statement, like course documents, to evolve over time:

'It can't be set in stone, it must be constantly revisited' (B)
'It needs to be continually evolving, followed up by discussions so that anxieties can be laid to rest and progress can be made to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education.' (C)

Professional concerns about our ability to deliver a high-quality education in what are seen as increasingly difficult circumstances were raised throughout the interview sessions. It seems likely that if the Benchmark Statement can be of genuine help in this situation, it could become central to art and design education.

INTERVIEWS – THE CONCLUSIONS

Despite variations, a broad consensus emerged around most of the issues raised during the interviews.

Centrally, the Benchmark Statement is viewed as an accurate and suitably generalised description of the reality of art and design education.

Of the two main functions, the original comparative function is seen as potentially problematic and difficult to achieve. There is concern that its application could result in prescriptive or limiting outcomes although the general desirability of a method of comparison was acknowledged.

The more recently suggested function of the Benchmark Statement as a prompt for debate and critical self-reflection is considered appropriate as an aspiration but all interviewees are sceptical of the ability of the current Benchmark Statement to work in this way. The lack of specificity, of evaluation, of challenge and of depth are cited as problems.

There is agreement that discussion and reflection would be more frequent and focussed if formal structures were in place to facilitate and encourage staff involvement. Responses suggest that debate is frequent but
‘rather haphazard. Good practice is not necessarily shared...we tend to work in isolation’. (C)

There is enthusiasm for formally arranged discussion time:

‘a lot of learning has gone on on my part but there’s no time - (possibilities) are strangled at birth. It’s like seeing heaven and then being told you’re not going there’. (A)

Few interviewees cited a need for an additional document to aid debate and critical self-reflection; none were convinced that the Benchmark Statement fulfilled this notional requirement. Since various internal and external mechanisms, formal and informal, already function in this context, careful consideration needs to be given to how exactly the Benchmark Statement fits into the existing matrix and what benefits will accrue from using it.

However, despite reservations, staff were keen to engage with the pedagogic function of the Statement and suggested a number of ways in which this could be strengthened. Most proposals require institutional or cross-institutional support, and an extension of the content of the Statement to make it a more appropriate vehicle for prompting debate and reflection.

**RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS**

The Art & Design Benchmark Statement provides an honest and non-prescriptive description of degree-level art and design education in the UK. That it has been widely accepted within its subject community is evidenced by the positive comments made by the 21 institutions who responded to the Panel’s request for feedback, and reaffirmed in the interviews undertaken as part of this paper. A recent THES article (2002) reveals the shift in the QAA’s position which now fully supports this approach to benchmarking, prioritising acceptability and ownership over standardisation and judgmental comparison.

Problematically, the very qualities which ensure the Benchmark Statement’s acceptability (its generalised, non-prescriptive approach) seem, on current evidence, likely to limit its efficacy as a springboard for pedagogic reflection. This limitation is unsurprising given the Panel’s original remit. They were not required to produce a document which promoted debate and self-critical reflection, nor were they asked to suggest/impose the ways in which it should be utilised.

If the Benchmark Statement is to function as a critical working document for those most involved in the design and delivery of art & design programmes its content needs to be extended, its context clarified, and its use supported/encouraged at a national level. Responses to the interviews and professional experience suggest that the content of the Statement will be more valuable if it moves beyond the descriptive to become provocative; if it has
opinions and makes judgements, and if it supports these judgements through evidence and example. In addition, its place within the ongoing debate needs to be formalised and time allocated for structured discussion within and between institutions. This aspect needs careful consideration: if, for example, the major forum for the Statement’s use is within official monitoring procedures then it is unlikely to be readily accepted by the profession; if it is presented as a relevant aid to pedagogic debate then, on the evidence of this paper, it will be warmly welcomed.

NOTES

Staff Interviewees
All those interviewed (with the exception of Tim Coward) are permanent academic staff members teaching on the BA Graphic Communication course in both theory and practice areas. Five of the six contributed significantly to the design of the current course (which was validated in 1998); all continue to contribute to ongoing modifications.
Length of service within UWIC ranges from 3 years to 15 years; extent of general experience at degree-level art and design education ranges from 8 years to 30 years.
Those interviewed were on both full-time and fractional contracts. The latter continue to practise professionally. All are research active and the majority have, or are in the process of obtaining, post-graduate qualifications.
Two staff have recent experience as course directors, one is Learning & Teaching Director for the School. Four of the six interviewees are members of the ILT.
Tim Coward is a former Head of the School of Art and Design at UWIC and is currently Director of Research & Graduate Studies and a member of the School’s Management Group.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHY

The author, Ruth Dineen, is also a member of the BA Graphic Communication course team and the ILT She has taught at HE level for 18 years and had overall
responsibility for the design and initial implementation of the current BA degree course, and a previous one-year top-up BA in Graphic Communication.