

Identification: mcw00133

**Louise J.I. McWhinnie**  
**Lecturer (Visual Communication):**

**University of Technology Sydney, Faculty of Design, Architecture & Building**

Tel: Work: (02) 9514 8933 Fax: (02) 9514 8787 E-mail: [Louise.McWhinnie@uts.edu.au](mailto:Louise.McWhinnie@uts.edu.au)

Louise McWhinnie is a Lecturer in Visual Communication at the University of Technology Sydney. Prior to lecturing in Australia, she worked as a graphic designer and lecturer in London. Her interest in the area of international design and design education developed during her employment with Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, The London Institute. During this time she spent two and a half years as a seconded course director, establishing and developing a new graphic design course in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Louise is presently undertaking doctoral research into culture and the study of graphic design by international Asian students within the context of Australian universities.

### **Design Education and the Production of Culture**

**Abstract:** This paper reports on a pilot study designed and undertaken by the researcher, utilizing a questionnaire to sample 362 first and second year design students from two metropolitan universities. The first stage of data collection was used to address issues such as the demographic background of the student population and the factors involved in university selection and course expectations.

From here, the research will progress in the form of a naturalistic inquiry entailing individual and group interviews with a small sample of international students drawn from the population of the pilot study. At this stage, the researcher anticipates emergent issues to include those of identity and subjectivity.

This paper draws upon the researcher's background as a lecturer in the UK and most recently Australia, and the experience gained during a two and a half-year educational secondment to Malaysia.

### **Introduction**

The cultural diversity and wealth of diverse experiences that International Asian students bring to their study in overseas universities can be of immense inter-cultural value to the university, staff and students in terms of learning. The posture of the researcher however, is that in the study of a subject such as graphic design, in a setting outside of the students' educational and cultural experience, this cultural diversity can also be a cause of difficulties and dilemmas.

The purpose of this study is to focus specifically on the teaching and learning experiences of international Asian graphic design students within Australian universities. The intention is to identify the nature of the students' cultural transition and the particular difficulties and dilemmas encountered in the study of graphic design in Australian universities. This will be

done through the exploration of subject specific difficulties and dilemmas, how difficulties are identified and resolved by students and staff and why such difficulties can exist. Also to be explored will be the interaction between the students' familiar cultural framework and the teaching and learning of a culturally based subject such as graphic design, when taught and studied in a country not of the students' cultural background. Underlying this study will be the investigation of the subject of Graphic Design as taught in Western Universities and how this may in itself pose inherent cultural dilemmas for international Asian students amongst others.

This study aims through qualitative methodology to consider student concerns and to gain a broader picture of the issues that students identify. This will be done with specific reference to the nature of the subject of graphic design. The study will particularly reference the students' pre-university educational background and experiences, how it has prepared them for degree study in this subject, how their inherent cultural characteristics influence, guide and affect their study of the subject, their lecturers' awareness or lack of awareness of their culture and it's effect on their work.

The two elements of the main body of research are Culture and Graphic Design Education:

**Graphic Design:** At the heart of the study is the subject of Graphic Design, in itself a dynamic element of and visual representation of culture. It relies upon culturally understood convention as its tool of communication. The subject of graphic design and its teaching at degree level is a relatively new subject area in terms of research. In order for students to question why and how they work in the way that they do and the dynamic effect that culture plays in this process, research must be undertaken to enable academic staff to develop responsive teaching strategies. The aim of the study is not to define graphic design but to explore its nature, particularly within the university setting as perceived by the active participants (staff and students).

Much of graphic design depends for its message on a culturally agreed understanding of meaning and convention; conventions agreed and mutually understood between the designer and the audience. Were I in within the study to attempt to offer my definitive meaning of the subject of graphic design, I would in fact simply be offering its meanings and conventions as they relate to me through my own perceptions and cultural frames. The study will through interviews, questionnaires and classroom observation, consider the populations' analysis of what is graphic design and how is such an untraditional university subject taught and studied within the context of a university.

In terms of university academia, graphic design is still a relatively new addition. Without a long tradition, it is still very much trying to establish itself and define itself and it's place within the academic precincts of the university. To an extent it sits as an uncomfortable subject within the framework of an educational institution intent on published academic achievement by both staff and students. As a subject it is very broad, fluid and flexible and unlike many other university subjects, contains few definites: there are no absolute rights or wrongs. Students' personal understanding, definition and structuring of the subject comes about through the flexibility and creativity of experiential studio learning. In identifying the distinctive features of graphic design Licko describes its culturally embedded character when she says, "Although science and design are both based upon experimental investigation, the comparison is not altogether straightforward; science investigates naturally occurring phenomena, while design investigates culturally created phenomena". Graphic design as a culturally based subject and the consequent fluid nature of the subject is what can makes it to a certain extent, a difficult subject to teach and learn outside of one's culture.

**Culture:** Culture is "constitutive, not in the form of 'value orientations' or guides or 'models' for action, but as finely ingrained in what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, or the habituated practices of human beings. Accordingly, culture, understood as the very ground of being and practice, has force in the lives of human beings orienting them to the horizons of their experience" (Bruce Kapferer, Foreword to *Designing Culture*). Fundamental to the study is the issue of culture and its influence in underpinning the students' university study and the exploration of the subject that is graphic design. The research intends to assess the dynamic role that culture plays upon study and learning experiences.

This study is largely one of culture. Although methodologically naturalistic, the theoretical platform of the study concerns the presence of culture as a determining factor and possible cause of dilemmas in the student's study of graphic design within an overseas university setting. The main body of the research will be in the form of a naturalistic inquiry, and will focus on the identification, manifestation, cause and possible resolution of subject specific issues and concerns as perceived by the students and staff of two Australian university design courses. Although not strictly speaking a longitudinal study, the research will consider the impact of the element of time as a factor in the mediation between the students' cultural transition, adaptation and assimilation throughout the three stages of data collection.

This particular paper though draws upon some on the results of the study's pilot study, which was undertaken during the first few weeks of the 2000 university academic year.

### **Population and Setting**

Staff and first and second year international Asian students from two Sydney university design degree courses were chosen to participate in this study. These are:

- i. The Bachelor of Design Degree: The University of New South Wales
- ii. The Bachelor of Design (Visual Communication): The University of Technology Sydney

The two universities and courses chosen to undertake the study were selected due to their reputations in design education, their metropolitan positioning and the large numbers of international design students that they recruit. Both offer two quite fundamentally different design degree courses. The University of New South Wales provides a wide ranging course with graphic design as one of the three major components studied throughout three years of the four year course, and offered as one of the students' specialist choice of final year subject. Whilst the University of Technology Sydney offers a specific yet broad ranging degree course in visual communication.

As it is predicted that the major period of difficulty and dilemma through cultural transition, adjustment and resolution, will occur during the early years of students' study, the pilot study and main body of research will in the whole, focus only on the first and second year students of both universities courses. During the pilot study for the first stage of data collection, all design students (local and international) in the first and second years at UTS and UNSW were invited to participate. The participation of the local students at this stage of data collection was designed to act as a control, allowing for comparison and ensuring that initial responses were not interpreted as being purely international student specific, but were seen within a wider context.

During the later stages of data collection in the main body of the study, a representative body of three to five students from each of the four participating academic years will be established. These will participate in the remaining period of data collection through questionnaires and group and individual interviews.

## Methodology

Following a literature review and discussions with individual staff and students of both participating universities, a questionnaire was developed for the start of the academic year. This questionnaire along with a detailed report was submitted to the Ethics Departments of both universities for approval prior to its use. The project was personally introduced and the questionnaire distributed to the first and second year students of both universities during the first three weeks of the 2000 academic year.

In total, 362 completed questionnaires were returned: 136 from UTS and 226 from UNSW. Based on verbal confirmation from subject and course directors at both universities, this represents a response rate (from a potential population of 404 students) of 90%. The 136 UTS completed questionnaires from a potential population of 158 students, represents a response rate of 87%. This was made up of all 78 responses from a first year of 91 students (86%) and 58 students (87%) from a second year of 67 students. The 226 UNSW completed questionnaires from a potential population of 246 students, represents a response rate of 92%. This was made up of all 147 first year students (100%) and 79 students (80%) from a second year of 99 students.

## Design of Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the pilot study consisted of 40 questions. Six were designed to establish demographics (gender, age, nationality, etc) and six required three ranked responses to questions concerning choice of subject, course, country of study, study aims and predicted difficulties. The 25 questions employing the 5 point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) were designed to address issues of student expectation, awareness, academic confidence, socialization, and communication.

The researcher's experience of living and lecturing within Asia for a number of years proved invaluable in the design of the questionnaire. As a result, great care and sensitivity was taken with the wording and phrasing of questions and the consideration of the necessary questions needing to be asked to elicit the required information.

## Results

### *Student Demographics*

Of the 362 students who completed and returned the questionnaire, the overall gender breakdown was as follows:

**Table 1: Gender breakdown of student population**

Female		Male			
%	No.	%	No.		
Overall population		77%	278	23%	84

All Local students	79%	243	21%	66
Local Students of Self declared ethnicity	82%	58	18%	13
International students (non-Asian)	50%	8	50%	8
International students (Asian)	73%	27	27%	10

The 37 Asian International students within the population of the sample (25 first year and 12 second year students) consisted of:

32% Korean students, 29% Indonesian, 11% Hong Kong, 11% Taiwanese, 5% Singaporean,

3% Chinese, 3% Japanese, 3% Malaysian and 3% Vietnamese.

Under the heading of nationality, 23% of the local students (20% of the total number of students who responded) provided their ethnic background. Although the researcher hadn't asked for this information and hadn't anticipated it, it in fact created an interesting comparative group for the differences to be established between local & international students in terms of culture and adaptation. The question of nationality was asked in order to determine the country of origin of the populations international students. The use of the word 'nationality' instead of the words 'race' or 'country of origin' was determined by its use within the beaurocracy of immigration and university admissions, and the international students' recognition of its use. Having not asked for ethnic background, it is quite possible that a number of students of ethnic background simply didn't state their ethnicity, merely their country of citizenship. However, it could be perceived that those who stated their ethnicity did so because their race and culture plays a more dominant role in their lives than for others, possibly through the maintenance of language and culture within the home, or with family or friends.

### Reasons for studying design in Australia

Following on from the demographic information, the students were each asked to give 3 responses (ranked in order of importance) to each of the following question:

*"Why did you choose to study **design** at degree level?"* and

*"What attracted you to choose to study design at **this university**?"*

They were then asked to

*"Give the three most important reasons for deciding to study design **in Australia**"*

This question was designed mainly to determine the reason for international students decisions, however it revealed some interesting points from local students.

When asked this question, a number of local students reacted by not stating why they chose to study in Australia, but why they chose *not* to study outside of Australia. Faced with the concept of studying not just overseas, but outside of their own culture, many local students responded with comments such as:

*"I wanted to be in a comfortable environment that I was familiar with"*

*"Easier - enough things to cope with without cultural / language difficulties"*

*"Want to have influences in my study that relate to my home country"*

*"My home country - a familiar set of cultural rules & expectations"*

*"I could not see any significant gains in studying in another country"*

*"I know the most about this culture, and it wouldn't be logical to start studying elsewhere"*

*"Get used to university, not both a new country and uni"*

*"Practicalities - my own capabilities, both social & experiential at this point in time"*

*"I wouldn't have the courage to study overseas"*

It has to be wondered whether the local students who responded with these points of view, have ever considered that there are international students within their lectures, tutorials and classes who daily are undertaking and facing the difficulties and dilemmas that they themselves saw as reasons for not studying overseas. A significant number of local students stated that the fact that their family were here and that they only speak English were reasons for not studying overseas. These however are issues that international Asian students have to face for the duration of their course. Within their day to day study overseas, Asian students are not only learning within their second or third language, in a subject that has its own 'design language' but also with a written language that is fundamentally different to their own.

A number of the international Asian students when asked to *"Give the three most important reasons for deciding to study design **in Australia**"* unlike the local students, regarded overseas studies as a potentially positive experience, and responded with such responses as:

*"To see the world and think about design in world-wide any time"*

*"To learn more about natural concept of Design within a beautiful environment"*

*"Getting more different experience in overseas"*

*"Studying design in different culture environment"*

*"Challenging and experiencing"*

*"Meet different people"*

*"To have an experience in design from overseas"*

*"Understanding design concepts in developed countries"*

*"Learn many different kind of design"*

Just as the local student almost all responded with the practicalities of cost and location ("because I live here"), the Asian International students responses also were naturally quite often practical:

Three of the students had studied within Australian high schools, so continued education within the country was natural.

30% of students mentioned location "it's near my origin country"

30% mentioned the cost of education in Australia. Quite often though, it appears their decision to study in Australia was made because "tuition is cheaper than other western countries" and as one student said "its more economical than New York". Often the decision to not study in other countries is a basic as the exchange rate (as mentioned quite practically by one student).

24% of respondents mentioned that family and friends were largely responsible for their decision to study in Australia, one saying "had no choice, my parents wanted me to"

14% mentioned the reputation of design in Australia and 14% the quality of its education,

11% stated their reason being because "Australia is a multicultural country", in several instances because Australia is "a developed country" and in one case because it is " a free country".

Amongst other reasons raised, were facilities (particularly computing), safety, "*because it's a different culture*" and even the weather.

### **Conclusion**

Given both the large sample size and the relatively large response percentage of the potential population to the questionnaire, the results of the pilot study may be assumed to be indicative of students within Sydney university design degree education and hopefully Australian design education.

For the purpose of this paper and its restrictions of length, the population has been subdivided into only the four groups listed in table 1. Within the major body of the study, these groups will be further sub-divided to allow for gender, recent and non-recent school leavers and Asian and non-Asian ethnicity to be further considered as factors. Each of these sub-divisions will also be considered based upon year of study and particular course/university.

The undertaking of this pilot study has allowed the researcher to identify initial areas of focus within the study. These will be explored in more depth during the first questionnaire and interviews of the actual study, during the first semester of 2001. The responses gathered during the pilot study statistically represent the present first and second years of the two participating universities. In order to consider the adaptation and changes in student confidence, socialization and communication over the course of a year, it will be necessary to repeat the same questionnaire with the present first year during the first few weeks of their second academic year.



The pilot study has served its purpose. It has allowed the researcher to make contact with the population, establish a small sample from a large population and to establish demographics. It has also more importantly provided confirmation of the validity of the intended research. Like all early research however, the pilot study has also raised more questions. These questions have served to justify the time spent and the validity of undertaking a pilot study. As a result, the original instrument of the questionnaire will be refined and re-tuned. In a fundamental change to the design of the study, it is intended that local students will now participate in at least the first two stages of the three stages of data collection. It was originally planned that local students would only participate in the pilot study and first questionnaire to act as a control and to allow the researcher to establish demographics. However, the pilot study has revealed that local students have an important role in contributing to the success of the study. This reason alone confirms the validity of the undertaking of this pilot study.



## References

- Austin-Boos D.J. (editor) (1987). *Creating Culture: Profiles in the study of Culture*
- Chalmers, D and Volet, S (1997) Common Misconceptions about Students from South-East Asia Studying in Australia. *Higher Education Research and Development*, v16, n1, 1997
- Guba, E. G. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1981) *Effective Evaluation; Improving the Usefulness of Evaluation Through Responsive and Naturalistic Approaches*
- Heller, Steven (1997). *The Education of a Graphic Designer*.
- Kapferer, Bruce. (1987). *Creating Culture: Profiles in the study of Culture* (foreword), Editor Austin-Boos
- Licko, Zuzana (1995). *Discovery by Design from Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*.
- Lincoln, Y.S and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Enquiry*
- Millar, D and Branson, J. 1987. Pierre Bourdieu: Culture and Praxis from *Creating Culture: Profiles in the study of Culture* Editor Austin-Boos
- McWhinnie, L.J.I. (1999). A British Graphic Designer: Teaching and Learning in South - East Asia. *InSEA 30<sup>th</sup> World Congress Papers: Cultures and Transitions*.
- Wilkinson, J.W., Mahara, A. & Quester, P.G. (1996). Asian Students: Their Experiences and Perceptions of Australian Universities. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, V7(3), 1996
-