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The Education of the Social Designer

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of Higher Education (HE) programmes of study in the broad area of social design highlights the instructional challenges of how to educate the social designer. The evolution of HE programmes of study in this academic area has developed without agreed-upon criteria. It is characteristic, however, of social designers' working practices that they deal with complexity that often requires multiple stakeholder participation and cross-disciplinary knowledge. It is a challenging task to strike the right educational balance to provide the appropriate skills. The unpacking of instructional trends in social design programmes of study can provide a stepping-stone to further elaborate on the education of the social designer, and this is the aim of this paper. Through a textual analysis of forty-two (42) programmes of study in social design in thirteen (13) different countries, this paper explores emerging instructional themes with a particular focus on competencies, entry criteria, programme content, teaching and learning and assessment, and it identifies curriculum design innovations.

Keywords: Social design, Education, Higher education, Teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, Higher Education (HE) programmes of study in the broad area of social design and innovation have proliferated. This is attributed to changes in the role of the designer following the shrinking of the welfare state in Europe and the monetary crisis of 2008. It is argued that the extension of design education into social issues has allowed designers to evolve their practices and engage with social challenges where services, as opposed to artefacts alone, create value – in this case, social value (Chen, Cheng, Hummels and Koskinen, 2015; Lasky, 2013; Hsu and Chen, 2022). Indicatively, designers are employed in a variety of working environments that include non-government organisations, foundations, non-profit groups, social design consultancies, and positions serving the government, education, and the corporate world (Emans and Hempel, 2014).

The gradual transformation of design practice through periods with distinct characteristics of objectives and outcomes reveals a linear and gradual transition from: a) symbolic communications and standardised methods; to b) the design of the form and functions of everyday objects informed by customisation in different contexts; followed by c) the design of organised activities comprising design cognition and multiple stakeholder participation activities; and lastly to d) the design of complex systems and service design

(Souleles, 2017). The parallel evolution of HE programmes of study in social design education tends to lag behind each distinct period of design objectives and outcomes (Souleles, 2013). The early social designers were pioneers practising in an area that did not draw on their formal HE qualifications (Chick, 2012).

In contrast to Art and Design HE in the United Kingdom where a subject benchmark statement provides information on threshold standards within the framework of formal qualifications (Wright et al., 2019), social design programmes lack commonly agreed-on standards. This can be attributed to the newness of the discipline (Souleles et al., 2020). To address this gap and delineate a minimum common academic ground, several general disciplinary parameters for social design have been proposed (Lasky, 2013). These advocate that social design education entails 'wide geographic and disciplinary territories' spanning graphic and digital media, products, devices and equipment, as well as tackling social challenges, such as lack of equal access to natural resources and community improvements (Lasky, 2013). A different report recommended that the educational boundaries of social design include a) research and teaching innovation that transcends disciplinary boundaries, b) context-based and research-based expe-riential learning; c) interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research; d) the balance of sustainability, business development, and social value creation; and e) trans-formational leadership and entrepreneurship (Han and Lee, 2020).

These early attempts to delimit the disciplinary boundaries of social design education are indicative – to borrow a phrase from Friedman (2012) – of an evolving discipline that is transforming from an ambiguous and undefined state into one of reasoned inquiry and articulated philosophy and methods. Despite the debate on whether social design is an attitude that practitioners can adopt under the wider notion of social responsibility that informs professional practice, or if it can be acquired as a discrete learning experience within a structured programme of study (Souleles et al., 2020), the proliferation of programmes in social design indicates that HE has risen to the instructional design challenge, something that is overdue (Souleles et al., 2017). This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by identifying characteristics and trends in content, pedagogy, the competencies fostered by social design programmes, as well as the emerging trends and innovative approaches in curriculum development based on a textual analysis of forty-two (42) programmes of study in social design in thirteen (13) different countries.

METHODOLOGY

An extensive online search was undertaken using various combinations of the keywords 'social design', 'social innovation', 'social impact', 'social entre-preneurship', 'sustainability', 'innovation' and 'design' combined with 'higher education', 'university', 'programme' and 'study'. This search produced a total of forty-two (42) programmes of study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in disciplines related to social design and from thirteen (13) different countries (Appendix). To various extents these programmes

of study provide a public view of curricula descriptions that include desired graduate competencies, the pro-gramme content, as well as descriptions of teaching and learning strategies. This collection of programme descriptions – as they appear online – comprises the pool of raw data for this paper.

Each programme description was saved in individual Microsoft Word files. Subsequently, they were imported into Atlas.ti (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software). This allowed for qualitative coding (Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019) based on the predetermined codes of a) 'acquired knowledge/ competencies' (the skills the programme seeks to foster), b) 'entry criteria', c) 'programme content', d) 'teaching and learning' and e) 'assessment'. After the coding of the first fifteen (15) programmes was completed, it was observed that common themes were emerging, indicating a level of saturation. At this stage of data mapping, the additional code of 'innovation' was adopted to capture the unusual and innovative aspects that can be described as best practices and/or novel approaches to curriculum development in social design.

This methodology has obvious limitations. First, the pool of raw data represents a snapshot from the period 2020-21, and the information provided online by the different universities about their programmes of study can date, change or be revised. New programmes of study not covered in this study may have been developed. Second, most of the programmes in the pool of raw data are at the postgraduate level – only six (6) are at the undergraduate level – and this prevents inferences for the latter vis-a-vis social design education. These limitations can be countered with the argument that with inductive coding, which entails predetermined codes to map the data, validity comes from making explicit connections between the data and the conclusions (Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019).

ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE/COMPETENCIES

This code refers to the competencies that the programme of studies seeks to foster for its graduates. It is not surprising that research skills feature prominently in this category, as there is often a compulsory research methods course/subject in postgraduate programmes. Other competencies include innovation, creativity, management of processes, ability to strategize and generate creative ideas, dealing with complexity, operating in multi-disciplinary environments, creating economic, social and environmental value, business skills and leadership. It is worth noting that all these competencies require integrative skills practised in cross-disciplinary contexts (Souleles et al., 2020). This group of skills is consistent with what the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education considers that holders of master's degrees should be able to demonstrate. "Typically, holders of the qualification [master's degrees] will be able to: deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements... demonstrate selfdirect-ion and originality in tackling and solving problems... decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations..." (QAA, 2010, pp. 16-17).

What emerged from the data is that several programmes contextualise graduate competencies and course aims within a wider framework of sustainability and/or environmental awareness and concerns. For example, "[Graduates will] Gain advanced design and research skills, as they relate to emerging materials, new technologies and sustainability… [Graduates will] Contribute to or address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals" (Appendix, Victoria University of Wellington). Although it is educationally sensible to make the connection between transversal skills and the concept of sustainability, some programmes of study do not make explicit associations with a social or environmental contextual framework but refer to an undefined contribution to wider social causes and values. This difference in approach can be attributed to deliberate emphasis and specialisation – environmental concerns dominate this area – instead of producing generalist graduates. It may also be indicative of the urgency within HE to embed environmental concerns in programmes of study.

ENTRY CRITERIA

This code refers to the qualifications and/or other requirements that an applicant needs to enter a postgraduate programme in social design. Among most of the programmes included in this study (Appendix), there is a preference to seek applicants with undergraduate qualifications in art and design disciplines, such as product design, industrial design, design engineering, photography, textiles, fashion, costume, stage/theatre design, architecture, interior architecture, interior design, jewellery design, furniture design, model-making, fine art, including architecture and visual communication. This preference for art and design entry qualifications is expected because design disciplines share common epistemologies (Kim and Tan, 2022) that are used to address complex social issues (Souleles, 2017). Some programmes of study accept entry qualifications in communication and social sciences. There is often a requirement that undergraduate entry qualifications have a minimum pass grade. Often, a written state-ment and/or a portfolio of work are also requested from applicants.

Consistent with the argument that social design entails multidisciplinary teams (Souleles et al., 2020), several programmes of study have widened entry criteria to include practitioners from different professional backgrounds. For example, "[Applicants can be] professionals dedicated to the world of business and strategic planning, entrepreneurs and industrialists from different sectors… Other professionals with proven experience in the field of design, innovation or marketing" (Appendix, Istituto Europeo di Design).

PROGRAMME CONTENT

This code refers to the contents of the programmes of study and in particular the discrete areas of knowledge to be acquired by learners. Here it is useful to provide a group of terms that represents the diverse content of the programmes in this study, as opposed to a list of course titles that comprise them. These terms include sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs), ecological and environmental issues, innovation, business, finance, consumerism, alternative economies, entrepreneurship, funding, marketing, intellectual property, copyright, management, communication, technologies, digital tools, product design, urban planning, information management, visualisation, metrics, data analysis, impact, evaluation, prototyping, sociology, culture, politics, contextual issues, history, policy, ethics, methodologies, systems thinking, inclusive and universal design, leadership, decision-making, participatory methods, dealing with communities, ethnography, semiotics, postmodernism and biomimicry, which is imitation of the models, systems and elements of nature to solve complex problems (Qureshi, 2020).

It is a challenging instructional design task to incorporate the above areas of knowledge in a single coherent programme of studies in social design. In practice, programmes of study are structured based on deliberate choices of areas of specialisation. Thus, they tend to emphasise a particular academic direction while they exclude or provide less content that is considered secondary or a lower priority. In addition, in various combinations and degrees, some of the above terms (content) appear within individual courses/subjects. For example, "This course will introduce students to a range of topics relevant to design practice today, including cross-cultural, ethical, political, and economic issues that impact our interactions with the environment and each other" (Appendix, New Zealand Victoria University of Wellington).

To enhance the content of programmes of study and ensure their relevance to present political, economic and social developments, it is advisable to incorporate the perspectives of relevant external stakeholders and practitioners (Social Innovation Academy, n.d.). In this respect, several programmes state their connec-tions with the workplace – a dialogue that keeps content relevant. For example, "…you can complete an industry-based research project through a Design Re-search Internship" (Appendix, The University of Sydney).

TEACHING AND LEARNING

This code refers to the range of teaching and learning practices that are stated in the programmes listed in the Appendix. A wide variety of instructional strategies are employed, including project-based learning, practical experience, learner collaboration with external partners and communities, guest speakers, interactions with social and political entrepreneurs, activists and organizations, study visits, case studies, tutorials, workshops, seminars, studio practice, collaborative and team-based learning, professional internships, field assignments, independent/ individual study, one-on-one mentorship, selected readings, presentations, discussions, group exercises, peer-to-peer exchanges, coursework, asynchronous learning, online discussions, experiments and testing strategies, simulations, critiques and enquiry, debating, problem identification, multidisciplinary instruction, multiple perspectives and diverse strategies for research and design, research-led design, research-oriented teaching and divergent methods of story-telling.

How the above teaching and learning strategies are applied and combined is likely to differ among programmes of study. However, the high number of

learner-centred pedagogies as opposed to teacher-centred ones suggests that overall appropriate pedagogies are used (Souleles, 2017). Depending on the context, as well as accommodating different learning styles and needs, different competencies and knowledge areas require diverse instructional methods to select the most appropriate (Vettori, 2020). The option for a variety of instructional approaches seems to apply to the programmes in this paper. The provision of diverse learning spaces (fieldwork, internships, communities) beyond the physical space offered by formal education is a positive element; social design requires a learning ecosystem that comprises policy-making, the economy, and civil society to commonly solve social challenges (Giesecke et al., 2020).

ASSESSMENT

This code refers to the range of assessment strategies as they appear in the programme descriptions listed in the Appendix. The range of 'what' is assessed includes research proposals, projects, literature/artefact reviews, seminar papers, essays, critical, evaluative and self-reflective reports, examinations, portfolios, exhibitions, case studies, documentary and reflective process blogs, presentations (group and individual), outputs, proof of concepts, interventions and prototypes.

Two observations are made about this category. First, in comparison to the other categories, this one is mentioned the least; not enough is stated on assessment strategies. Second, although 'what' is assessed is addressed, there is an evident gap in 'how' learners are assessed, for example, whether through peer reviews and/or external evaluations by examiners/assessors.

The significance of appropriate assessment strategies ('how' as opposed to 'what' is assessed) in social design disciplines becomes evident when considering the post-positivist approach to assessment – the ability of learners to undertake tasks that resemble authentic situations. These tasks are complex socially and intellectually and cannot be quantified by objective criteria; educators and learners are engaged in a dialogue to interpret and evaluate outcomes (Souleles, et al., 2022). The challenges posed by design for social change are open-ended, in the sense that they are not well defined, have no right or wrong solutions and are often referred to as 'wicked problems'. Therefore, they require the ability to integrate diverse types of knowledge, and the related integrative competencies need to be evaluated through an appropriate assessment strategy (Souleles, 2017).

INNOVATIONS

The final code refers to the content of the programmes that was identified as unique and innovative. For example, data visualization as a course/subject can provide skills in effective (visual) techniques to analyse and communicate accessible information about social design projects to different audiences and stakeholders. In one programme of studies, data visualization is combined with external partners to make it directly relevant to the workplace: "…various tools and techniques help us communicate with and influence others.

Guest lecturers include data scientists, financial modellers, and corporate social responsibility experts" (Appendix, School of Visual Arts).

Disability as a social design concern was another innovation identified in programmes of study. As a topic, it is referenced in various parts of the SDGs (United Nations, n.d.) and specifically in areas that relate to education, growth, employment and inequality. In one programme, the reason to include aspects of disability in social design education is eloquently argued for as follows: "People with disabilities are systematically excluded from cultural systems, spaces, and practices… Critical disability studies productively reorient our basic assumptions about disability and ability, encouraging us to consider how disability functions as a civil rights issue, identity, culture, and social construction" (Appendix, Tulane University).

Political literacy and design activism are other innovations identified. Design activism overlaps with social design; it is situated within everyday contexts and processes of social and economic life (Julier, 2015). It is argued that design activism has political intentions and often functions outside formal structures through grassroots settings and community groups (Armstrong et al., 2014). Thus, an understanding of the dynamics of social groups with political dimensions and varied motivations can be useful for social design education. Some authors consider it essential for design practice, as the latter is increasingly entwined in contexts where political literacy is required (Koria and Prendeville, 2021). "… the consequences of social fragmentation, climate change, and economic uncertainties of our urbanized world create and renew governance through new behaviors: agility, responsiveness, resilience, collaboration, and civic representation. Political mobilizations, collective interests, and social concerns question this need for a revisited way of deciding and choosing what needs to be done..." (Appendix, Paris College of Art).

CONCLUSION

Much has changed since it was argued that the education of the designer requires a stronger background in sociology, psychology and public policy. The paradigm shift in design from objects to systems, which is associated with the period 2000–2020 (Margolin and Margolin, 2019), has moved the discussion about the education of the designer to the next level – to that of the education of the social designer. It is not about the need for change in design curricula but about the nature of the appropriate knowledge and competencies.

Manzini (2015) argues that intentional conventions are required to foster an effective social design culture that is 'dialogic'. These conventions emerge from a 'broad social learning process' that entails conversation and dialogue among diverse stakeholders. Dialogical approaches can be expected to feature in the social designer's formal education. This dimension – the conversation between different stakeholders and knowledge domains – is present in various degrees in the programmes in this paper. In some cases, this is complemented by the recognition that although design qualifications offer an advantage for entry into social design programmes, applicants from different

professional backgrounds are welcome. The dialogic approach extends to the contents of the programmes of study, not only the entry criteria, and comprises knowledge domains that require connections between them. Environmental themes, various approaches to solution-focused strategies, the management of processes, research methods, interpretation, communication, as well as the social sciences, are open to cross-fertilization and instructional experimentation. External stakeholders and practitioners often contribute to this process.

It is possible overall to note the prevalence and significance of integrative skills in the programmes of study. These skills entail human-centred competencies practised in multi-disciplinary environments – the essential abilities that can facilitate extended exchanges between different points of view and knowledge domains. The list of outcomes evaluated is extensive but lacks detail on how they are appraised. It is useful to reflect on how integrative skills should be assessed and how to communicate this to learners. Information design and social/political literacy were identified as innovative components of some programmes of study, but this does not exclude the possibility that there are more educational innovations. It can be argued that the innovative and unique characteristics of social design programmes of study should become more explicit. Finally, there is a consensus that pedagogies that are learner-centred and discursive and take place in different learning spaces including diverse communities are appropriate.

APPENDIX

Table 1.

	Country	University	Title of programme
1	Australia	The University of Sydney	Master of Design (Design Innovation)
2	Australia	University of South Australia	Graduate Diploma in Design (Sustainable Design)
3	New Zealand	Victoria University of Wellington	Graduate Diploma in Design Innovation
4	New Zealand	Victoria University of Wellington	Bachelor of Design Innovation - Major in Design for Social Innovation
5	Australia	University of South Australia	Master of Design (Sustainable Design)
6	New Zealand	Victoria University of Wellington	Master of Design Innovation
7	Australia	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology	Master of Design Innovation and Technology
8	USA	Tulane University	Bachelor Design-Social Innovation
9	Canada	University of Alberta	Bachelor of Design (BDes)-Social Sciences Route
10	USA	Indiana Wesleyan University	Design for Social Impact B.F.A.
11	USA	Savannah College of Art and Design	Master's in Design for Sustainability
12	USA	Maryland Institute College of Art	Master's in Social Design
13	USA	Harvard University	Master's in Design Studies (Mdes)

Continued

Table 1. Continued.

	Country	University	Title of programme
14	USA	University of San Diego	Master of Arts in Social Innovation
15	USA	University of the Arts Philadelphia	Master of Design for Social Impact
16	USA	Massachusetts College of Art and Design	Master of Design: Design Innovation (MDES)
17	Canada	Ontario College of Art & Design	MDes - Strategic Foresight and Innovation
18	USA	School of Visual Arts	Design for Social Innovation MFA
19	USA	Pacific Northwest College of Art	MFA in Collaborative Design
20	USA	Tulane University	Minor in Social Innovation & Social Entrepreneurship
21	Canada	Ontario College of Art & Design	Bachelor, Social Innovation Design Pathway
22	USA	Parsons School of Design	Transdisciplinary Design MFA
23	Austria	University of Applied Arts	Master Social Design - Arts as Urban Innovation
24	France	Paris College of Art	Master of Arts in Design for Social Impact
25	Germany	Berlin University of Applied Sciences	Master Social Design and Sustainable Innovation
26	Italy	International Training Centre of the ILO	Master's in Social Innovation for Sustainable Development
27	Italy	Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti (NABA)	Master of Arts in Social Design
28	Netherlands	Design Academy Eindhoven	Master's in Social Design
29	Poland	Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice	Master Inclusive Design: Health and Social Well-Being
30	Spain	Istituto Europeo di Design (IED)	Continuing Study Postgraduate, Programme Design for Innovation Strategy
31	Spain	Istituto Europeo di Design	Master of Design and Innovation
32	Spain	Elisava Barcelona School of Design and Engineering	Master's Degree in Research for Design and Innovation
33	Spain	Elisava Barcelona School of Design & Engineering	Postgraduate in Innovation and Design Thinking
34	UK	The Open University	BA (Honours) Design and Innovation
35	UK	Arts University Bournemouth	Master's in Design and Innovation
36	UK	Edinburgh College of Art	Master's in Design for Change
37	UK	University of the Arts London	Master's in Design for Social Innovation and Sustainable Futures

Continued

Table 1. Continued.

	Country	University	Title of programme
38	UK	Manchester Metropolitan University	Master's in Design Innovation
39	UK	Royal College of Art	Master in Global Innovation Design
40	UK	Loughborough University	MA/MSc Design Innovation
41	UK	Kingston University	Master in Sustainable Design
42	Hong Kong	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design	BA(Hons) in Social Design

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