Learning curve – what makes a good design course?

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Product design is about solving problems, writes Karl Hurn, Programme Leader for Product Design at the University of Derby. Today we must solve those problems with innovative and sustainable solutions.

The BA and BSc Product Design programmes at the University of Derby are built around this core philosophy. Both programmes are designed to provide our students with the breadth of skills required by industry, with the BA having its emphasis in industrial design, focusing on aesthetic design and human interaction, and the BSc giving emphasis to functional and engineering design.

When redesigning, updating and revalidating the new programmes, we worked closely with employers, graduates and industry professionals to ensure our students leave the course with the knowledge and skills they will need to get a successful career in the design industry, either at home, or increasingly, abroad. We also endeavour to make
as many of our projects’ briefs as possible ‘live’ projects set by design firms so that our students feel a strong connection with what is actually going on out there in the real world.

The programmes also expose our students to a broad range of teaching and learning approaches, which mirror the design environments they are likely to work in. Sessions range from straightforward lectures, to studio, CAD lab, workshop and face to face tutorials covering everything from Bauhaus design history through to the latest cradle to cradle and life cycle analysis environmental concerns for product design.

The University has invested heavily in a state-of-the-art facility that offers the students not only a great working environment, but also access to industry standard CNC, rapid manufacturing and 3D scanning equipment.

We encourage our students to take a placement between their second and third year to help them gain valuable industrial experience. We have had students go all over the world working in sectors as diverse as a small aircraft firm in San Diego to a white goods manufacturer in Peterborough. As well as the experience, students also gain a University Diploma in Professional Practice which is recognised by industry.

We have strong connections with our graduates, which often leads to them reengaging with the programme they studied further down the line. Recent live projects have come from BabaBing Ltd – who design and manufacture baby equipment for John Lewis – Boots and Mothercare and Reef One Ltd, manufacturers of the Bi-Orb tropical fish tank. Both of these companies are owned and run by successful graduates of the programme who see Derby as a key springboard to their success in the design industry.

Our graduate employment success stories also read like a who’s who of the product design industry, with employment and jobs offers for this year’s graduates coming from Lego, VTech and Dyson to name but a few.

What we try to instil in our students initially is a passion for design and an ability to question existing thinking or the accepted norm. If the passion is there, we believe we can nurture the other elements, and this is what makes Derby such an exciting place to teach and study product design.