

**David Ballantyne's notes from the meeting between  
Foundation Course Staff with the Delivery Partnership Chair of  
the Art & Design Working Group.**

**22 October 2008 Guild HE, Woburn House, London.**

The meeting was led by Chaired by Professor David Vaughan, Chair of the Art & Design Working Group of the Delivery Partnership. and Alice Hynes of Guild HE

The other meeting participants included a number of Admissions staff from different HE institutions, two representatives from UCAS, an HE Fine Art BA course leader, staff representing organisations involved with widening participation and a large amount of Foundation course leaders.

David Vaughan began the meeting by outlining the circumstances which led to the moves to simplify the Route A / Route B application system. Very simply they were as follows:

About 5 years ago the Government called for HE institutions to plan for the eventual implementation of post qualification applications. This would mean that all students applying for university courses would do so after they had received the results of their current course qualifications. Therefore an A level student would not apply for their chosen university courses until much later than the current route A or Route B systems – currently this would be sometime in August. The idea of this proposal was to make the application processes more straight forward for students in that they would know that they had the qualifications for the H.E. courses they were applying for. This would make the process more transparent and cut down wasted application time thus making sure that students went to courses they were best suited to.

The Universities were concerned about this initiative and set up working parties to address the related issues. The current streamlining of Route A and Route B is part of the response to the Government's original request. Ironically this proposal will mean that for many Art & Design students the application will be brought forward instead of put back. It was pointed out at the meeting that this does not seem in the spirit of the original proposal.

**David Vaughan and Alice Hynes then updated the meeting on the changes and areas for discussion that the working party had been involved with over the last 18 months or so:**

Data from UCAS which outlined the rise in applications at Route A for Art and Design students and suggested that this was evidence that Route B is becoming a less significant application route for Art & Design students.

It was suggested that some applicants were confused by the dual application route and that there are a number of students each year who mistakenly apply through route A & route B to the same course.

The above as well as the difficulty of specifying if some subjects actually came under the ever expanding category of art & design, were given as key justifications to bring the Art & Design application process in line with other H.E. subjects

The working party had come to the conclusion that the route B sequential system was unfair as students sometimes wasted application choices because their course choices were already full by the time their application was considered (this usually occurred at the second choice stage of the application process). It had therefore been decided to get rid of the sequential application process in favour of a five choice system which would allow students to make 5 simultaneous choices to University courses from the start of the application processes in September through to the deadline.

The new deadline for the system which would replace the current dual route A & B application system continues to be an area of discussion/disagreement for the working party and those representatives of HE Institutions they were consulting. This had led to a postponement of a final decision on the final deadline. As a temporary measure for applications from next September 09, HE courses (not institutions) will be given the option of choosing one of two deadlines (**not both!**) – either 15 January or 24 March. Applicants would be aware of which date their chosen courses have chosen and would make application choices with this in mind. Following further consultation with representatives from HE, FE and Schools, a decision on a final date (January, March or somewhere in between). It was stressed that the final date would have to be agreeable to all types of courses not just Art and Design.

Foundation staff made a range of points some of which I have summarised below. I think it is fair to say that there was not a single representative from Foundation/Diploma courses present who were in favour of the scrapping of route B and all staff spoke passionately about the negative impact upon the quality of educational provision that may occur as a result. It is also fair to say that the course leader from the Fine Art Degree course concurred with the comments put forward by Foundation/Diploma staff. He stressed that his course still saw Route B as the preferred application route as the students were generally more informed and clear about the application decisions they had made where as Route A applicants tended to be more speculative.

### **Points made by Foundation/Diploma staff:**

The removal/reduction of the 24 March deadline would not only affect Foundation students but also all diagnostic art & design courses (i.e. National Diploma courses) which rely upon their students having sufficient time to practically explore the breadth of art & design specialisms through their course practice and to investigate the range of courses / institutions available in order to make informed choices. All staff felt this would have a long term negative effect on student breadth of skills, retention and achievement at F.E. and H.E. It was also felt that it would damage the perceived value of the diagnostic education many Art & Design students receive between school and university. It was felt that 'A' level Art courses were not a viable substitute for the breadth of skills / creative education provided by diagnostic courses

Foundation/Diploma staff pointed out that the rise of numbers of students applying through route A was due to a number of reasons that the working party data did not explore. The first was that many Foundation/Diploma courses encourage their students to apply through route A & B in order to 'play the system'. This allowed their students a practice run at the interview process as well as potentially increased number of first choices. It was pointed out though that most of their students still ended up going to their route B choice because their sense of their work and specialism was more informed by the time of their route B interviews. It was also pointed out that some University courses had begun to accept students with only 'A' level Art qualifications (who would have been encouraged to apply through route A by their schools). The working Party had no data on the retention/achievement figures for students accepted through route A with only A level subjects. It was generally accepted in the meeting that these students would be not as well prepared for HE Art & Design courses as applicants from diagnostic courses. Staff pointed out that many of these A level only applicants were filtered on to Year Zero courses by the Universities they had applied to. This was generally seen as an inferior educational experience to Foundation / Diploma courses as the students received less specialist attention and had the options for choice of eventual specialisation limited by the University they were enrolled at.

Foundation/Diploma staff were concerned by the choice of HE Art & Design courses to opt for **either** a January 15<sup>th</sup> or March 24<sup>th</sup> deadline as they felt that even if the H.E. course could see the value of the later deadline for the time it gave applicants from diagnostic courses to make an informed choice, they would very likely have pressure placed upon them from their university management to opt for the earlier application route in order to define their course numbers earlier, thus minimising the chance of unfilled places on their courses. The scraping of the sequential route B system would only exacerbate this by introducing a greater element of course number uncertainty into the

processes. This would lead to university course interests taking precedence over student needs. Staff also expressed concern that some University courses already accept far more students than they can comfortably accommodate, knowing that by the end of the first year a process of natural selection will have taken place through a percentage of the students having dropped out. It was felt that the proposed changes could make this practice more wide spread.

Foundation/Diploma staff felt that a reduction in the application deadline would lead to a gradual shrinking of emphasis/importance of the pre HE Art & Design diagnostic course which would not only be detrimental to student's education at FE and HE levels but would also be disastrous for the long term quality of creative practice within the British Art & Design sector. Staff felt that those individuals and groups who had made the current proposals / decisions about the scraping of route B did not fully understand the role Foundation/Diploma courses play in bridging the huge skills/knowledge gap that exists between school and university art & design education.

Foundation/Diploma staff expressed their disappointment at the lack of consultation they had received about the changes and that they had only been invited to a meeting to discuss the issues when many of the key decisions had already been made. No one at the meeting from Foundation / Diploma courses had been invited to any of the meetings to discuss the changes that had taken place during the last 18 months. Staff also pointed out that this lack of consultation or even knowledge of the changes was also reflected in the correspondence they had had with colleagues in the Schools, FE and HE sectors. There was some criticism that the majority of staff on the Working Party were from HE Admissions and were therefore likely to be less knowledgeable / sympathetic to the needs of users of the Route B process. David Vaughan and Alice Hynes defended the consultation process by saying that all institutions had been approached for their opinions about the changes but that the response had been a combination of favourable or not at all. He said that he felt there may have been an issue within institutions not filtering the information down to course leaders and department specialists but that there was little they could do about this. Foundation/Diploma staff felt that the consultation process had been ineffective in gaining their views of the proposed changes. It seemed that the larger Universities were having undue influence on the decision making process. It was not felt that this was in the interests of student's education, ability to make informed choices or widening participation (which was supposed to be the reason for the changes in the first place).

David Vaughan was asked if he thought British Art & Design education would be better or worse off if the proposed changes, including a decrease in the application time, went through. After a short pause he said that personally he believed the longer students had to make their choices about specialisation and course progression the better. However he did not feel the argument had been

won with the representatives of HE who were being consulted about the changes. To this end he asked all staff attending the meeting to send an e-mail outlining the educational / sector benefits of the later application date (March 24). He said for the opinions to be taken on board by the Working Party and the HE Stakeholders group they must be sanctioned by the Institution the contributor works for. There was general agreement in the meeting to do this.

**Points in support of the later date from HE and FE staff should e-mailed to:**

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