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## Establishing an excellent foundation for drawing: Manchester Metropolitan University

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### Brief description

The Foundation Art and Design programme at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) continued to be deemed outstanding in its [December 2012 inspection report](#). A key feature of the programme's success is a continuous and intensive focus on drawing and more importantly, developing students' understanding and appreciation of drawing in its widest sense. As a result, the quality and richness of students' final portfolios and their individual expression of ideas are enhanced significantly. The team's passion for drawing and for experimenting with new ideas, concepts and materials, is infectious and is highly motivational to students.

### Overview – the provider's message

'Drawing has traditionally been acknowledged as fundamental to our investigation and development as artists and designers. We all draw at different stages in our lives, we make uninhibited drawings when we are children, and we draw in sand on the beach, on steamed up windows or dusty surfaces. As teenagers we like graffiti and later in life we "doodle" when on the phone or in meetings; human beings have an inherent desire to make a personal mark, to establish evidence of their presence in the world.

On the foundation programme we are predominantly dealing with post A-level students from a variety of academic backgrounds and experiences. This is an important time to re-appraise drawing - to



deconstruct previously existing rules and habitual skills, opening up new possibilities, in particular to the context of the various art and design specialist pathways.

Our mission is to equip students with suitable drawing skills to progress in these specialist areas but also to arm them with approaches to drawing that might question existing practice and possibly introduce and establish new concepts relevant to current professional art and design practice’.

*Tony Ratcliffe, Programme Leader*

## The good practice in detail

So drawing on an art course is straightforward, right? Putting pencil or charcoal to paper, sitting at an easel with a still life or life model in front of you? Not at MMU. Here, drawing is presented as a pivotal skill that needs to be carefully understood, questioned and continuously explored by students in new and inventive ways. As one lecturer says: ‘Why draw sat at a table when you can try drawing under it?’



## Turning the spotlight on drawing and conceptual thinking

Drawing is structured and implicit through the course, starting with a two-week intensive look at visual language. Often students arrive on the Foundation Course believing that everything they do has to culminate in a final product. The staff team at MMU work exceptionally quickly to reverse this train of thought and help students place the emphasis firmly on idea development and the design process. In the first two weeks, students are often encouraged to use anything but pencils or traditional drawing equipment. In fact, they are required to come up with an array of approaches themselves, make tools to draw with and experiment with media in order to explore a wide range of mark-making. The message to students from the very beginning is to embrace different ways of working.



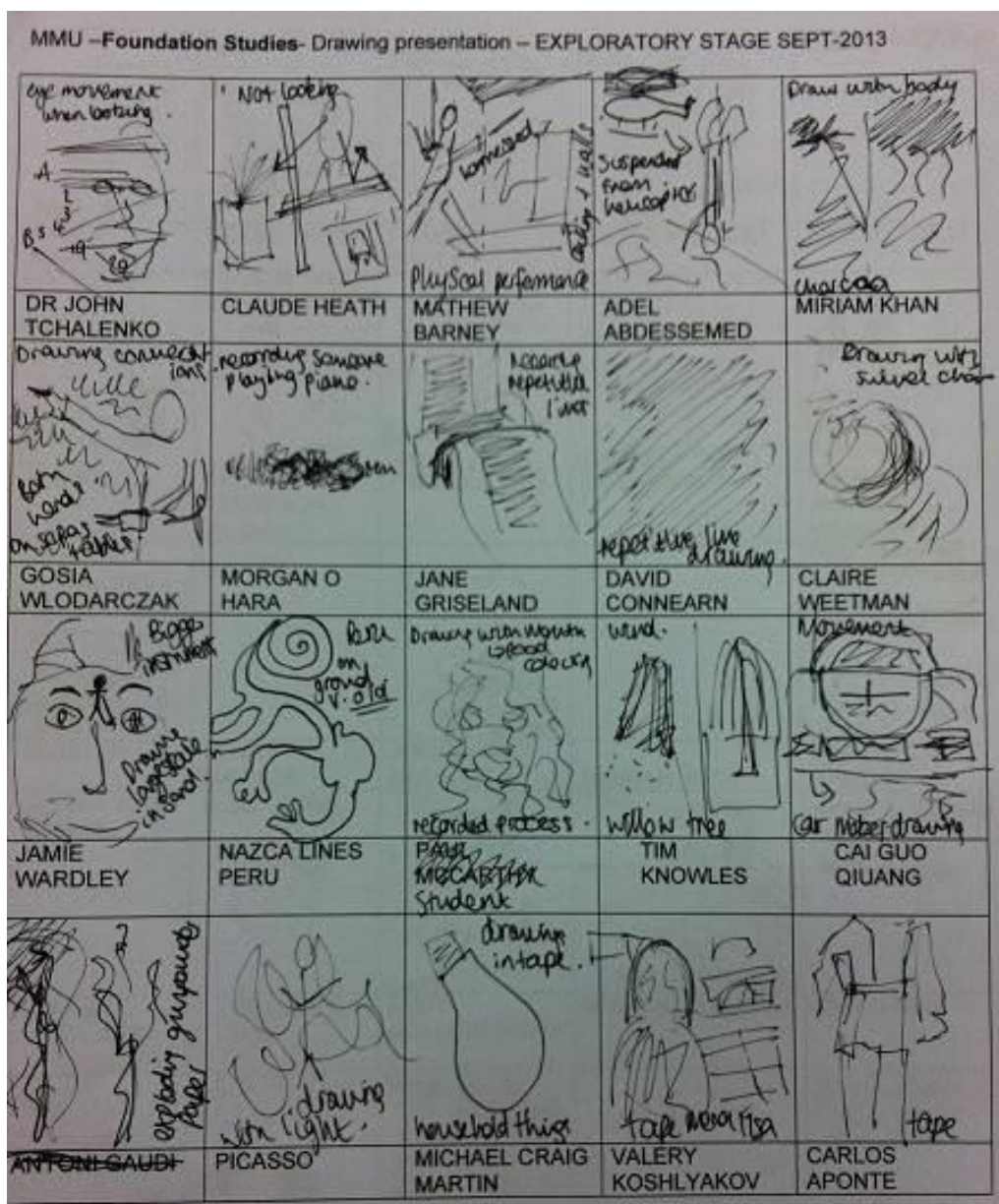
Students draw with everything from their hair, knees and toes to drawing with torch light or smoke and photographing the images. They have the freedom to run a long way with an idea and take ownership of how they interpret imagery. Consequently, their ideas can range from baking designs into toast, drawing with ice cream, wire, text or paper to using fake tan to draw images on the body. One graphics student created a large image of a rugby scrum using mud and a fine art student produced sensitive drawings based on paint-ridden tabletops from an art studio. Not only does this make drawing fun and exciting, but it removes any preconceptions they may have had about how to draw and gives them the freedom to express their ideas with confidence.



From left to right, drawing and mark marking using light, stitching, wire, ink and acetate, ink and wax, pen, paper and shadow.

So what is so different about the approach at MMU? Perhaps because the focus on drawing is evident absolutely everywhere. For example, when students go on trips to galleries and museums they are encouraged to think carefully about how they use their sketchbooks to capture both visual information and use written notes in a way that makes best use of time and maximises their learning. Staff encourage visual note-taking in contextual studies so there is a visual reference as well as written reference to help students interpret information but also capture how particular artists or images make them feel. Staff even designed a 'rainy day' project for when students can't attend lessons which outlines, 'How to draw from your bed'!





*The use of thumbnail visual recording and referencing starts from early in the course*

## Projects that fuel the imagination

Each project has a designated day for drawing. The projects are carefully designed to ensure they are thought-provoking and spark curiosity in students. As students could end up following any career, from architects and designers to embroiderers or painters, project briefs are broad enough to engage all types of art and design interests. Open projects are designed specifically to help students explore conceptual drawing and thinking. Nevertheless, project briefs provide enough of an outline structure, often using numbers or the alphabet; for example, 24 ways to see/interpret a particular object, to help students initiate their thinking. Several [drawing projects](#) are self-directed and set as weekend homework, as part of preparation and research for the next assignment.

Most projects are kept short but lively. For example, one early drawing project includes sketching moving images from film clips, incorporating elements of colour theory. In another short introductory project, students make their own tools for mark-making and then document these tools as part of the drawing process.



From exploring the simplest objects, making their own tools and experimenting with pigments such as beetroot, paprika and lip gloss

Several projects interlink and develop students' technical understanding and confidence in using materials. For example, a '[site and scale](#)' project follows on from an '[alternative image](#)' project, requiring students to take their interpretation of a household object and translate this on to a particular site or location; anything from a bus stop to a country park - shifting the emphasis of material exploration to one of scale. Students document their outcomes of this project in the form of photographs and capture the processes they have undertaken on worksheets. Even three-dimensional projects, such as the excellent annual cardboard catwalk project, which was exemplified in the inspection report, explores references to materials, scale and drawing.



*Students are encouraged to play with scale, using tape or recreating household objects using materials to hand and then photographed and documented onto worksheets.*

An important aspect of delivering this high-quality practice is how the staff team invests time to question, rewrite and improvise new ideas about drawing, introducing current personal practice, referencing contemporary contextual debate and reappraising the advantages and limitations of previously run projects and workshops. Joan Beadle, senior lecturer says, 'We

promote drawing as a restless enquiry, a way to investigate an interest in things that you are curious about, this involves drawing from observation but also includes drawing things which may not be so easily observed such as a telephone conversation or a dance track.'

The university has an excellent range of specialist equipment available and you may think this is why students are able to do so well in the field of drawing. However, the focus is very much on basic, low- tech approaches encouraging the students to realise the value of using whatever is at hand. The emphasis is upon creative and sensitive use of whatever media they use. For example, students are encouraged to use modest mono-printing techniques and often set up simple but highly effective still life arrangements using an eclectic range of recovered mechanical and organic objects to evoke debate and enthusiasm. The students are encouraged to work from a point of personal interest, something they feel has significance to themselves.

### Reflection and subliminal messages

Students are challenged to continuously question: Why are you drawing what you are drawing? What are you gaining from it? How are you going to make the image/s your own?

As they move into their specialist pathways, the staff team continue to reinforce drawing concepts and encourage students to apply and extend what they have learnt already. Staff repeatedly stress that drawing is about visual thinking and encourage students to reflect how drawing skills and techniques might enhance particular investigation and documentation in students' pathway areas. As a result, their drawing becomes more sophisticated throughout the specialist pathways, particularly in how they apply new and previously learnt techniques to create texture, form and image.

‘As a group of staff we try to be reactive and proactive to opportunities, exploring new approaches and using our own experiences and skills to demonstrate and captivate the students’ imagination’. - Tony Ratcliffe

In addition to all the active projects, current students' work and an archive of previous students' work is referenced exceptionally well to inspire and motivate. Images cover the corridors, exhibition spaces and plasma screens so students can subconsciously absorb examples of techniques and drawing styles on a daily basis. The displays of work are changed frequently to keep images fresh and stimulating.



The relevance and importance of drawing are reinforced through to the very end of the course. This culminates in a drawing exhibition, displayed alongside the foundation final major project show, with awards presented for the best drawing and sketchbooks. Not only does the exhibition establish the value placed on drawing to future students visiting from schools and colleges, but also reminds current students that the final major project is initiated from drawing investigation.



Students' final project work, regardless of their art specialism, reflects the influences of drawing and mark making

Drawing and the development of students' conceptual thinking at MMU do not just encourage learners to think outside of the proverbial 'box', it helps them go some considerable distance beyond it. It's no wonder so many successfully progress to prestigious art schools and universities.

## Provider background

Manchester Metropolitan University is the sixth largest in the United Kingdom with around 35,000 students. It provides an extensive range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses and one further education course, the foundation diploma in art and design, which is housed within its [Manchester School of Art](#) provision.

Art foundation students opt for one of four specialisms; fine art, textiles/fashion, graphics or 3D. Selection to a place on the [art foundation programme](#) is very competitive. Around 170 students are enrolled onto the foundation programme each year.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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