

White Paper 2026

A Shared Vision for Industry Led Design Education within Higher Education

A combined initiative by

dba × **CHEAD**

The right design skills for the future we need to design

In a world of ever accelerating pace, of technological disruption, of complex global challenges and in urgent need of sustainable redress, the UK's design sector is crucial to the nation's ability to meet this demand for change. As the authors and designers of the products, services and brands we use every day, and of the environments in which we live, work, and play, we must guarantee the quality of the design talent coming into the £100 billion design sector, and so maintain our global standing as a destination for world class design services.

Starting with the aim to secure the design talent pipeline, this report suggests a systemic approach for leaders to reimagine succession into the industry for future generations of design graduates and ensures that emerging practices reflect the aspirations and realities of those who will enter, inherit and reshape the design profession.

Design industry and higher education collaboration models once built on individual relationships and networks cannot

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be relied upon to meet this need, and that is why the two leading sector bodies representing both the design industry and the higher education design sector came together to address the challenge.

The Design Business Association (DBA), the trade association of the design industry in the UK, and the Council for Higher Education in Art and Design (CHEAD) the representative body for universities offering degree and postgraduate courses in art and design, convened a series of six regional roundtable discussions, with over sixty design professionals and leading design educators. Over a period of six months, our two networks developed some statements of intent towards a unified, collaborative sector-wide approach to higher level design education which will shift both sides from short term actions to long term impact.

The DBA and CHEAD have, through their respective members, the authority and agency to create the change that is needed. But we sit in a national context that

is created by Government, and so Government has a role to play too.

In September 2025, when the UK hosted the World Design Congress, The Rt Hon Ian Murray MP, minister for the creative industries, spoke of our need to harness talent into industry and into design, and of skills, and access to skills for those that are talented but not given the opportunities, as being a key driver of what he came into politics to do. Today, we call on Minister Murray to help realise his ambitions by making a commitment on behalf of Government, as the DBA does on behalf of the design industry, and as CHEAD does on behalf of its education members, to realising the ambitions of those destined to be the future leaders of our industry. That commitment is to shape the talent pipeline to be the best it can be, for the future our nation's talent are designing for.

Deborah Dawton
CEO DBA

Professor David McGravie
MA FHEA FRSA, Chair of CHEAD.

Key Findings

Challenges to overcome:

Over the course of our discussions, one overarching theme kept reoccurring. The need for the design industry to be embedded in the lives of those educating our future designers, and responsible for the programmes designed to bring that talent to maturity, and to the market.

To do that together we need to overcome the following challenges:

Collaborations between the design industry and higher education are widespread but piecemeal, often lacking a strategic and systematic approach resulting in well-intentioned but low impact interventions.

'We can take one or two placements but alignment with HE timetables are difficult.'

Design graduates can lack commercial awareness, pace, and industry preparedness leading to a difficult transition from their course of study into the workplace environment.



Graduates' awareness of, and their expectations for, entry level jobs are often at odds with the opportunities available, diversity of roles and skills requirements. This is a fast-changing space and both industry and individuals struggle to find entry points as AI potentially impacts on and erodes entry level roles.

'The Design Sector moves at pace of light; HE moves at the pace of paper.'

The design industry leadership frameworks may not have adapted to the changing demographics, diverse social values, and career motivations this current post-Covid generation seeks from employment - such as hybrid, local, flexible working, engaging in purposeful work with an ethical outcome and needing to feel their mental health and wellbeing will be nurtured.

'Two different worlds smashing together, but we like it.'

The university sector is under unprecedented pressure to produce financially viable programmes with good employability outcomes but lacks the capacity for its staff to meaningfully engage with industry for their own staff development or to have the time to innovate, co-design curriculum and take a sustainable long-term systems-wide approach to employer engagement. Education should be able to align curriculums with the needs of evolving sectors like the design industry to ensure graduates match employer demands.

Similarly, the design industry is under commercial pressure and has limited capacity to devote non-billable time to engage with some of the regulatory processes and timescales within higher education - such as validation of new programmes, portfolio reviews, developing new apprenticeships and achieving accreditation with awarding and professional bodies.

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The appetite for design experts to contribute to new flexible models beyond the 3-year degree is apparent, and new funding schemes such as the Lifelong Loan Entitlement could enable this, particularly for "fast-track" and upskilling programmes plus continuing professional development for existing designers. Leaders in the design sector are also keen to contribute to HE research culture and knowledge exchange but need agile frameworks and funding to facilitate their engagement.

'All private businesses are profit driven. There's no fat. We are incredibly creative environments but for smaller businesses it's increasingly difficult to take on starting roles and very difficult to train people. We have not got the time.'



Industry value the 'creative play' within a Foundation Level art and design education, particularly in light of the decline of creative education in school pre-entry qualifications, as highlighted in the Creative Education Coalition's Creative Education Manifesto. Designers mentioned the freedom of creating studio-based spaces for ideation and experimentation through foundation courses and questioned the need for subject specific degrees lasting 3 years.

The London 'pull' effect is diminishing as the cost of living, affordable housing and high-cost transport act as barriers to widening access for more regionally dispersed graduates. There is an opportunity to raise awareness of local opportunities, complemented by the global reach of most

agencies, and to create a distinct regional voice for the design sector in multiple regions across the UK.

Address the challenges and we address the readiness of today's, and tomorrow's graduates. As an industry sector, design businesses may be small, but they operate at the decision-making tables of the clients they work for. To maximise the return on every pound invested in design, we need the transition of graduates into the sector to be as seamless as possible, to be one where they can contribute appropriately because they are ready for professional practice, to be one where their ideas and vision for the future can be brought to bear on the brands, the innovation eco-systems of industry and the lives of all in society who interact with products and services every day.

“Design is at the heart of everything we do as a creative nation.... building the foundation for the next wave of British innovation that will drive growth right across the country.”

Chris Bryant MP

Minister for the Creative Industries, September 2025

Our Recommendations

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Our aim from the outset of this partnership was to arrive at a set of recommendations for government, for the design industry and for the higher education sector. Our intention is that, if each of us plays our part, we can create the change needed to help those entering the design industry thrive - quickly, confidently, and with the power to make a meaningful impact on the economy.

These recommendations will form the next stage of collaboration between the DBA, and CHEAD. Those entering higher education design courses today to become the leaders of tomorrow, need us to act now. The cost to the individual, the design industry, and ultimately the UK economy of delay is to deny industry, and society the benefit of the impact that design

can stimulate, the value it can add, and the prosperity it can bring about.

At a time when young people are struggling to find entry-level positions, we need graduate talent, a crucial puzzle piece in the picture of the design industry, to arrive with the precise skills, attitude, and fresh perspective needed to complete that picture and make our business operation whole. This will give them the best start in a fast-paced, exciting and world class sector, one that is able to continue their growth, get the best out of them, and see them contributing to the success of their clients through their work within months of starting in design.

But we all have a part to play. Government. The design industry. The higher education sector.

One overarching priority recommendation

If our educational establishments and industry partners can only commit to one action, it is this:

THE priority is to engage design business leaders on Higher Education Industry Advisory Boards - by clarifying terms of reference, connecting a regionally distributed network of advisors and strengthening the whole design communities' contribution

and strategic impact within higher education decision-making at a systems level, we can impact what and how design is taught. And, where HE Industry Advisory Boards don't exist, launch them.

The DBA and CHEAD commit to making this a reality between our members over the coming three years.

Full set of Recommendations

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The appetite for change, and the resources available in industry, education and governments vary according to the context we find ourselves living and working in. The following recommendations have been included as a means of capturing all of the ideas that came out of our work. Those reading this report with a bigger appetite for change or perhaps greater resources, are asked to consider committing to one or two of the following, time, money and energy permitting.

The DBA and CHEAD will be communicating the outcome of this work to Government and will update members on progress made possible by them collaborating with us.

The impact of these recommendations will bring about the prosperity the Government is looking for and will create jobs and opportunity for graduates; a measure that is critical to higher education, and will allow the much needed talent for the UK's design industry to continue to compete on a global stage bringing about the change in businesses that only design can.



Recommendations to be actioned by the Government

Design skills are needed for future growth and as part of the Creative Industries Sector Plan/Industrial Strategy.

The Government should:

1. Include Design as a priority subject for targeted funding as part of the Lifelong Learning Loan Entitlement, Strategic Priorities Grant and for maintenance grant support.
2. Put creativity at the heart of Curriculum and Assessment Reform and support new pathways including T and V Levels from school through to further and higher education and into employment.
3. Reinforce Foundation Courses, BTECS, Higher Technical Qualifications, Apprenticeships and programmes that widen participation and access.
4. Continue to support National Saturday Clubs and other non-assessed outreach and enrichment programmes.
5. Mainstream the Creative Careers Programme with parents, advisors and young people with additional digital assets and narratives created by the design sector, for example, the My Life in Design podcasts provided by Red Setter and the DBA.
6. Appreciate that SIC, SOC and graduate outcomes data definitions and metrics do not accurately reflect the complexity and diversity of existing and emerging career roles, freelancing opportunities and graduate level jobs in the design sector.
7. Recognise that design's value, multiplier effect and return on investment is reflected in the clients' books rather than in the SMEs' reported turnover.

Recommendations to be actioned by the Design Industry

The potential for talent is everywhere so your recruitment profile should be inclusive.

1. Prioritise getting involved on your local HE Industry Advisory Boards because of the opportunity this creates for greater influence, and more strategic partnerships such as designer residencies, course validations, course content design, developing industry led apprenticeships and research collaborations.
2. Collaborate with your local university, college and schools more generally by offering internships, placements, portfolio reviews, guest lectures and talks, industry days, real world briefs, design challenges, and mentoring.
3. Develop in-house industry preparedness programmes pre- and post-graduation to accelerate the transition from university into the design sector.
4. Create opportunities that expose students to the design agency working and commercial environment, including raising awareness of the multiple roles and opportunities available.
5. Develop an inclusive talent pipeline that embraces diversity, challenges conventional recruitment practices and reaches out beyond your usual networks.

Recommendations to be actioned by Higher Education

Make industry preparedness a graduate outcome for all design programmes.

1. Engage with industry at a more senior and systemic level, beyond course tutor level and one-off interventions, by inviting local design leaders onto your Industry Advisory Boards, and if you don't have any, setting them up. Work with industry to establish strategic partnerships such as: designer residencies, course validations, course content design, developing industry led apprenticeships and research collaborations.
2. Consider the sustainability and scalability of impactful partnership working and build this into strategic planning and workload models.
3. Embed industry awareness, commercial skills and business acumen at a much earlier stage in curriculum design.

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4. Build pace into projects and assignments by setting time restrictions on briefs and embedding sprint projects, alongside longer projects, to reflect the real-world working practices of design agencies.
5. Provide support for lecturers and technicians to spend time in industry alongside dedicating budgets at commercial day rates to incentivise visiting professionals from smaller design agencies, and freelancers, to engage in course design and delivery.
6. Lead the careers and employability teams to a place of real world understanding of the dynamics and pace of the SME led design agency sector, in addition to seeking larger corporate in-house design opportunities, and provide the commercial operational context in terms of the ranges of work environments, expectations, entry points and opportunities to progress and wide diversity of roles.
7. Maintain broad and expansive foundation programmes and a range of pathways. Attract a wide range of applicants through flexible access and allow students to experiment, take risks, develop their creativity, resilience, critical thinking and to find their calling. The design industry is made up of many sub-sectors, each requiring a different shape of designer. School no longer facilitates the development of individual skills, but foundation programmes do. Nurtured and encouraged in that environment, we increase the probability of undergraduates being guided into the specialist areas that most closely match their talent and area of passion.

“ As Chair of CHEAD, I am delighted to endorse this important mission outlining the principles of industry-led design in higher education. Industry-ready design graduates will represent the future creative talent of the design sector, offering new, diverse perspectives, innovative thinking, and the energy to drive the industry. They will possess up-to-date technical skills in content creation, AI, and sustainable practices, informed by the vital real-world expertise they will have gained throughout their programme of study.”

Professor David McGravie MA FHEA FRSA

Professor of Arts and Culture

Chair of CHEAD

Pro Vice Chancellor (International)

Executive Dean

**Faculty of Arts Humanities and Social
Sciences University of Chester**

“ If industry and education are working well together, graduates enter their careers ready and equipped to contribute. We want this to be true for every design graduate, and we look forward to working with CHEAD to make this a reality nation-wide.”

Deborah Dawton

CEO DBA

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Conclusion

By the collective action of Government, the design industry and the higher education sector, we have the opportunity to build a bold and enduring partnership grounded in sustained engagement, purposeful collaboration, and a shared commitment to embed industry knowledge, professional skills, and commercial experiences directly into the student journey.

Our intergenerational mix of existing design professionals and emerging graduate talent is the creative force shaping the future of our design industry and beyond. Collectively, we must

create the space and the conditions to work together, think together, and learn together.

DBA and CHEAD members working in partnership can create, design, and deliver a design education that is present-proof, future focused and genuinely fit for purpose.

By adopting these recommendations and suggestions our partnership will be active, courageous and robust. We will remain agile and responsive to the evolving needs of our practicing designers and students of design and of a collective workforce increasingly defined by upskilling, reskilling, and continuous co-learning.

The DBA and CHEAD would like to thank all those that contributed their time and ideas to this conversation. We're grateful to those who hosted our meetings.

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