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Kieran Corcoran

*Technological University Dublin*, [kieran.corcoran@tudublin.ie](mailto:kieran.corcoran@tudublin.ie)

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## **TU Dublin: The Key Role of the Arts**

**Kieran Corcoran**

TU Dublin

One hundred years ago, Walter Gropius confidently stated that “the ultimate purpose of all art is the building” (*Manifesto of the Staatliches Bauhaus*, 1919). Memorably depicted in Lionel Feninger’s woodcut as a crystalline cathedral, he dedicated art and design education to its design and construction. As a simple expression of the essence of the modernist project it was perfect. But no such simple answer exists today. Any attempt to discuss the relationship between art, education and society in general must face the fact that key ideas such as society, art, culture and education are themselves undergoing radical transformation. We are living in an age where the impact of technological change – the emergence of big data, climate change, migration, social exclusion and new political models – has challenged accepted notions of the purpose of society, the role of work and, in particular, the practice of art and design. The development of a creative and cultural industry sector over the last 30 years, albeit as part of the precarious world of the “gig” economy (Duggan, Sherman, Carbery & McDonnell, 2018) have happened in tandem with the emergence of a whole new series of hybrid art and design practices. The concept of a university has not been immune from these changes, and the creation of Ireland’s first technological university (TU) should be seen as an opportunity to address key issues in the set of complex relationships between society, technology, work, culture, economy and the arts.

The level of activity across all cultural forms in Ireland has grown exponentially in recent decades, and the new TU can make a major contribution to its continued development and growth. In particular, it can address key issues in the Irish creative and cultural sector through its distinctive educational model, discipline spread and pedagogical processes. This might happen in a number of ways, reflecting the tension that can exist between training and education in the university and between commerce and creativity in the arts.

A number of international reports have identified a mismatch between graduate skills and the needs and demands of the creative and cultural sector. Traditional universities have encountered difficulties in providing an education that combines “practice based skills related to craft knowledge, team working and entrepreneurialism” (Bakshi, Hargreaves & Mateos-Gracia, 2013, p104). TU Dublin continues a long tradition of studio-based learning in art, design, media and music which prioritises what the same (NESTA) report calls “the key attributes of creativity, independence, problem solving and collaborative working”, and is ideally placed to overcome this problem. However, just as a university is much more than a supplier of skilled graduates to a wider economy, creative-arts education in the TU must also nurture and facilitate the development of free creative expression which everyone agrees is a vital part of any civic society and, ironically, is central to the innovation genie so prized by the creative industries. However, it is possible to argue that the importance of such traditional binary oppositions between education–training or creativity–commerce is becoming increasingly irrelevant in a world with much greater challenges, such as climate change, big data, migration, populism and civic alienation. The TU is uniquely placed to address these issues through its practice-based discipline mix and wide network of different knowledge communities of practice – artists, designers, musicians, engineers, biologists, journalists, film makers, mathematicians, physicists and computer scientists to name a few.

To develop an understanding of the position and role of the arts in the TU, it is necessary to examine a number of concepts, including the highly contested transition from traditional notions of high art to a concept of cultural and creative industries, how to position new hybrid art and design practices in a complex set of evolving relationships between culture, society and technology, and ultimately to examine the nature and purpose of the TU itself.

### **From high art to creative and cultural industries**

The concept of cultural or creative industries has gradually come to signify, in part, what used to be described by the general term “the arts”. The term was coined in its present form in the late 1980s and reflects the impact which popular culture – television, advertising, cinema, pop music, comics, science fiction – has had on our understanding of culture since the 1950s. Two key features of this change stand out. First, we can see the gradual breakdown of the distinction between high and low art which began when Lawrence Alloway proposed an “aesthetic of tolerance” in the 1950s, arguing that we should look at all forms of cultural expression as a continuum of practice rather than a pyramidal hierarchy with Picasso at the top and Elvis at the bottom. These changes played out from the 1950s to the 1990s through artist Richard Hamilton, Andy Warhol, the Beatles, the end of the Hollywood studios, punk, television, cheap colour printing, the growing information revolution, world art, feminism and the blurring of traditional political concepts of right and left. Second, we have what Fredric Jameson calls “aesthetic populism”. In *Post Modernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1994) he argued that aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production, and aesthetic innovation and experimentation have become key parts of advanced economies. Since the mid 1990s a large body of literature has been

developed around this concept, perhaps most notably in the much contested work of Richard Florida on creative cities.

Fundamental to this change is wider access through mass media to all forms of cultural expression, and the belief that all sections of society deserve access to culture as a matter of right. The terms “creative industry”/“cultural industry” reflect these changes, have made it possible to view cultural activity as embedded in society at large, and have encouraged research on its wider economic and social impact and effects. It is now possible to talk about the cultural sector in the same broad terms as the agricultural or banking sectors. (In fact, the 2019 report by the Arts Council of England on the creative sector uses a comparison with the UK agricultural sector as a way of demonstrating the economic potential of the arts as reported on [www.guardian.com](http://www.guardian.com), 16 April 2019). More recently, the term “creative economy” has been used to describe a set of activities that have traditionally been seen as antithetical to the world of business. As Handke and Towse state, “The term creative economy has taken hold in the last decade or so along with the adoption of the notion of creative industries encompassing the arts, heritage and cultural industries” (2014, p.1).

Since 2010 there has been considerable focus on trying to understand key features of the creative economy, in particular how to estimate value and how to model entrepreneurship and innovation within it. All reports indicate that the long-term health of the sector is very positive and will require a steady flow of suitably qualified graduates who can work as creative producers and/or managers. In Ireland, the first indications that this way of looking at the artistic and cultural life was becoming accepted was the publication by the Arts Council of Joe Durkan’s *The Economics of the Arts in Ireland* (1994). This landmark study identified the number of people working in the arts at 14,000 and also claimed that the

narrow range of art forms covered by the Arts Council generated £225 million. This information in turn was derived from Coopers & Lybrand 1994 Report *Employment and Economic Significance of the Cultural Industries in Ireland* which used a slightly different metric but concluded that total revenue of the arts is about £450 million; export earnings are approximately £100 million; state grants amount to £50 million; and total full-time equivalent employment is about 21,500 people. More recent estimates range from 194 million/3034 jobs for direct Arts Council funded clients, through the 782 million/26,519 jobs for the wider arts sector to 5,479 million/60,000+ jobs for the creative industries. A 2010 working paper estimated that “2006 Greater Dublin Area employment in the subset of industries delineated as creative industries was in the region of 77,000 (59% of national employment in the subset of industries delineated as creative industries)” with Gross Value Added (GVA) “in the region of €3.25 billion” (Curran and van Egeraat, 2010, pg17). More recently, the UNCTAD Creative Economy Outlook and Country Profiles (2015, p. 76) noted the effect of the recession and stated that “Ireland’s creative industries exports decreased from \$3,597.6 million in 2003 to \$2,196.5 million in 2012. Imports showed a significant decrease from \$7,201 million in 2003 to \$2,146.6 million in 2012, resulting in a positive trade balance of \$49.8 million. Audio visuals was a leading sector with \$1,036 million followed by design, publishing and new media.”

The United Nations *Creative Economy Report* (2013, p. 15) states quite clearly that the creative economy has become a “powerful transformative force” and “one of the most rapidly growing sectors of world economy”. It continues “A much greater proportion of the world’s intellectual and creative resources are now being invested in culture based industries, whose largely intangible outputs are as ‘real’ and considerable as those of other industries”. It identifies the key drivers in this transformation as “human creativity and innovation, at both

the individual and group level” and asserts that these have become “the true wealth of nations in the 21st century”. Neither is it all about monetary wealth, because “indirectly, culture increasingly underpins the ways in which people everywhere understand the world, see their place in it, affirm their human rights, and forge productive relationships with others”. It is clear that the cultural industries sector has made major contributions to cultural diversity and innovation worldwide and has played a key role in urban regeneration through the development of creative quarters. The positive social and life style benefits of an actively involved population in a wide range of cultural activities is now unquestioned by policy makers, and the Creative Ireland Programme is a part of the Irish government’s Project Ireland 2040.

However, in its current stage of development, the sector is plagued by the phenomenon of precarity, low wages, poor holiday and pension arrangements, and a lack of certainty in contractual arrangements. It has been argued that this is simply an effect of the economic and innovation model found in the wider entertainment industry where the “winner takes all”. Some theorists have also argued that the new discourse of the creative economy is actually a way of neutralising the critical and revolutionary potential of creativity by absorbing it into the overall consumerist economy, and the precarious work model is actually the perfect form and expression of neoliberal capitalism (for a comprehensive discussion and summary of the relevant literature on precarity, see Gill and Pratt 2008). Nevertheless, it is clear that the cultural and creative industry sector is both a generator of economic growth and a source of cultural and social diversity and richness. By developing new and innovative forms of research-informed art, design and media practices, TU Dublin can address the skills and training needs of the industry sector and contribute to the wider social imperative of creating a sustainable civic society.

## **Technological University**

The concept of the university and the idea of knowledge itself has undergone considerable change over the last 40 years. As Lyotard memorably argued in *The Post Modern Condition* (1979), the idea that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociably linked to the training (*bildung*) of minds has been gradually challenged by a new relationship which treats the ultimate goal of knowledge as a form of consumption and exchange. A new concept of knowledge as an informational commodity which is crucial to a society's productive power has emerged. The implications of this change for the traditional concept of the university have generated considerable controversy among academics, especially in relation to new forms of organisational structure and the overall mission of the university. While technological universities are long established across the world in many guises, the designation of a university as a TU is relatively new in Ireland. The proposal to establish a TU in Ireland was made formally in 2011, although the use of the term can be found in literature going back to the late 1950s (see Tuairim 1959, p. 28). The Hunt Report proposed the creation of this new type of university in 2011 by amalgamation of existing Institutes of Technology. The 2018 Technological Universities Bill which spelt out a detailed series of criteria (mostly in relation to research) which, if met in full, would allow a consortium to be designated as a TU, was approved in Dáil Eireann on 24 January 2018. The first consortium to apply included Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tallaght and Blanchardstown Institute of Technology, and this application approved in July 2018 after a rigorous appraisal by an international panel of academics. The new university was subsequently designated Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) on 1 January 2019.

Initially, we can say that TUs form a broad church, but roughly fall into two relatively distinct categories. First, there is a group of institutions that are based on a very specific platform of science and engineering, including TU Berlin, TU Braunschweig or Chalmers, SWE. For example, Chalmers states on its website that “With our broad scientific base and holistic approach, we develop technical solutions for the human race and sustainability on Earth”. In a similar vein ETH Zurich states “The basis of education at ETH Zurich is formed by the core areas of engineering, natural sciences, architecture and mathematics”.

The second group of institutions covers a very wide range of discipline areas but shares a similar if distinctive educational philosophy. For example, Curtin University, Australia highlights “industry-aligned undergraduate and postgraduate courses” while TU Delft, the Netherlands, states that it is “a place where academics and students think in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary terms”. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Australia states that it is not only “focused in its education and research, but also committed to a philosophy of education and research founded in action and experience”. It also emphasises that as “a university of technology and design, our approach to education and research will emphasize learning from action and experience, from studios to work placements, from research with industry to projects that develop our cities and communities”. Not surprisingly, these universities also have substantial art, design, film and music departments or faculties. In his report for the HEA, Marginson (2011, p. 15) states “The term ‘Technological’ should be understood as embracing a larger set of activities than those related to applied science alone” and that “technology can be understood as knowledge in use”.

It is possible to identify a number of shared characteristics which give us a reasonable framework for understanding what is different and distinctive about these universities. First,

TUs are very clear that their strategic ambitions are global and that they are very much focused on their international role. (One notable exception is the University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam who use an educational model based specifically on the city of Rotterdam as a unique identifier.) All of the TUs surveyed here emphasise the fluid and dynamic nature of their structures and educational philosophy, and see their central role as becoming leaders in innovation (as opposed, perhaps, to invention). They espouse a distinct (from traditional universities) pedagogical philosophy and an educational model which is action-based, practice focused, interdisciplinary and flexible. All have a very strong professional focus, aligned with an active policy of industry engagement: TUs work closely with industry through industry-aligned programmes, and pride themselves on producing employable and results-focused graduates. Approaches to research vary from research intensive to research informed, but all share a belief that research initiatives should be applied, solve real-world problems and underpin all educational programmes. The most striking commonality is the emphasis on a practice-based, action-focused and industry-relevant set of educational programmes, all directed towards making an immediate impact in the solution of real societal challenges.

Not surprisingly, a significant proportion of TUs have a wide range of art, design, architecture, music, film and humanities offerings at all levels, with allied research initiatives. The distinctive educational and pedagogical model of art, with its practice-based skills acquisition, studio-based learning and professional formation, seems like a natural home for higher-arts education. The studio model of art education has always been characterised as a way of learning through doing, with a strong focus on practice and professional formation. This model promotes the evolution of hybrid art and design practices, facilitates the emergence of the artist/designer researcher through its industry focus and makes

collaborating across platforms and knowledge fields real through its wider discipline mix. RMIT and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore are two good examples of TUs with a very strong arts offering. RMIT offers programmes in fine art, design, film and performing arts and is ranked 12 in the QS Global Subject rankings for Art and Design. NTU offers programmes in media arts and design arts and is ranked thirtieth. Currently there are six TUs ranked in the top 50 art and design schools globally, with MIT ranked at 5 followed by RMIT, UTS (23), NTU, QUT (41) and Swinburne TU (42).

The role of the arts within the TU Dublin can be considered from a number of different or related perspectives which touch on the many faceted nature of a TU itself. One possible model is to propose an Education Grid made up of (1) practice-based pedagogy; (2) innovative art and design practices; (3) research underpinning new content, platforms and forms of expression; (4) industry focus, professional formation and entrepreneurship; (5) societal impact; and (6) global challenges. Rather than considering this list as a hierarchy they could, for instance, be considered as signposts for a student's educational journey, allowing different choices at different levels or at different times in the student's own personal development: a student could focus on 2, 5 and 6 at postgraduate level but at undergraduate level would be mostly interested in 1 and 2. Equally this complex can inform curriculum development and allow for the development of new types of art and design programmes that can allow students and lecturers to work outside of traditional discipline constraints.

TU Dublin is already addressing this key developmental challenge for the Irish cultural and heritage sector. Looking to the future, the university can address a number of areas that are key to cultural development in Ireland. We can utilise the long tradition of professional

education across the university and the wide discipline mix to address key knowledge and skills needs through new programme developments. For example, the needs of arts organisations across Ireland for graduates with a deep understanding of the arts combined with the skills of marketing, management, law, coding and business is quite clear. However it is just as important to provide a space for research and enquiry through practice in the development of new forms of art, design and media practices which may lead to new directions in time across the cultural sector. The core studio-based approach in art and design education, as we have seen, is part and parcel of the wider TU pedagogical model and can be (and has been) utilised to develop new hybrid art and design practices that have addressed various social challenges across health, housing and community engagement.

Addressing the challenge of climate change is a major challenge for all sectors of society and the arts have a key role to play in this process for TU Dublin. A new MA in Art and the Environment is being developed at TU Dublin which will focus on raising awareness of the issues and educating art and design practitioners on how to address the Anthropocene in their practice. Looking outwards, the possibilities for collaboration across the university are manifold and in particular can address one very pressing issue. There is a clear need for research on an alternative and sustainable model of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship in the cultural sector to address the phenomenon of precarity and unequal distribution of rewards among “creative workers”. Initial work is being done on this issue through the TU Dublin Gradcam /School of Creative Arts Real Smart Cities RISE funded project which is looking at models of contributive income, based on the model used for French intermittent workers in the performing arts, and other alternative models of remuneration.

At a strategic level the arts have a key role in to play in TU Dublin two distinctive ways. First, the goal of an engaged university can be realised though a vibrant creative-arts community and environment based around the new university performance and exhibition spaces. A new campus with a creative arts centre at its heart can act as a catalyst for active engagement with a wide range of diverse communities in Dublin, Ireland and further afield. Second, the arts are essential to helping the new university develop a distinct mission by imagining new ways of living and new forms of expression which can help shape how the interaction between technological development and societal change manifests itself. I believe that the TU will have its most immediate impact, in the first instance, on the development of the wider cultural sector, including the creative industries.

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