Research Article

An Exploration of Issues in China Art Portfolio Training Institutions

Huajin Zhang[1]*, Noor Azly Mohammed Ali[1], Saiful Akram Che Cob[1], Yanying He[2], Gang Li[3], and Yifei Li[4]

[1]College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Malaysia
[2]Yuncheng Teachers College, Yuncheng, Shanxi, China
[3]School of Journalism, Art and Culture Tourism, Shanxi University of Finance and Economics, China
[4]Education Faculty, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract.

In recent years, a large number of Chinese students have travelled overseas to study art, which has spawned a new industry, albeit only about eight years old, Art Portfolio Training Institutions, and this study focuses on these institutions. Through qualitative analyses, the researcher interviewed educators and students in these art institutions to collect data from different perspectives. The main purpose of this study was to reveal the problems that exist in these portfolio institutions. There are still several issues within China's portfolio guidance institutions that impact the success rate of students' applications to foreign universities, varying teacher standards, false advertising, and indiscriminate fees. The study gives suggestions for portfolio institutions in choosing teachers and other aspects.

Keywords: portfolio industry, international art education, development strategies

Corresponding Author: Huajin Zhang; email: huajin0319@qq.com

OPEN ACCESS

1. INTRODUCTION

Aspiring Chinese students seeking art education in developed countries are required to submit portfolios encompassing sources of inspiration, design concepts, design processes, and design outcomes. [1]Renowned international institutions expect these portfolios to demonstrate creativity and uniqueness. The majority of students pursuing education abroad often complete such portfolios through art study programs. In China, the industry of portfolio preparation for art studies has recently emerged [2]. Teachers at these portfolio preparation institutions are frequently international students who have returned from countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Italy, South Korea, and Japan.

Through interactions with professionals in the field of education, researchers have discovered that cultivating outstanding portfolios requires not only teachers with exceptional concepts and extensive experience but also collaborative efforts from various

aspects. This industry faces numerous challenges, including decentralized management, teacher complacency, talent attrition, and even the closure of training institutions. Relying solely on the individual efforts of teachers falls significantly short of resolving these issues. However, addressing these challenges is crucial for the industry's development. Thus, this study delves into investigating and delineating these problems, providing valuable insights and recommendations for improvement to industry practitioners.

The selection of samples primarily includes globally recognized art universities, especially those that rank prominently in QS Art & Design Rankings and overall rankings. It involves teachers who later engage in teaching activities at portfolio institutions, as well as students who undergo training at these institutions.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main method used by researchers to collect data is interviews. Interviews are part of the qualitative research methodology and are used to obtain reliable information through face-to-face, open-ended question exchanges with interviewees [3]. In this study, interviews were used to gain professional perspectives and practical experience on design issues related to infographic design.

Purposive sampling method was used in this study to select experienced educators and students as participants so that a large amount of reliable data could be collected. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher established contact with the participants via WeChat and confirmed the interview time. During the interviews, the researcher asked specific questions. These questions were open-ended, allowing the interviewees to express themselves freely. The researcher's focus was on collecting descriptive and qualitative data.

The interviews provided an opportunity to delve deeper into the perspectives and experiences of the participants. In-depth one-on-one interviews were the primary method of data collection, ensuring accuracy, promoting more interaction, and facilitating a comprehensive exchange of information. Whilst the researcher prepared the interview questions in advance, some adjustments and additions were introduced during the interview process. The interviews were audio-recorded throughout and lasted approximately 45 minutes each, allowing participants ample time to share their experiences.

The use of open-ended questions in the interviews did facilitate the eliciting of valid and detailed responses from the interviewees. As Cohen and Manion (1984) emphasise,

open-ended questions provide flexibility and allow the interviewer to explore all aspects of the data and gain a deeper understanding of the respondent's perspective. [4] The purpose of using open-ended questions is to allow the researcher to capture the perspectives of the participants without the need to pre-select specific categories through a pre-determined questionnaire. [5] By transcribing the interviews, the researcher can focus on actively interacting with the interviewees and capturing their responses in real time without having to rely solely on notes, which may result in details being missed. Transcribing recorded interviews allows for thorough data analysis and helps to identify key themes, patterns and insights. It provides a written record of the interviewees' responses, enabling the researcher to review and analyse the data at a subsequent stage. Transcription also ensures that information is easily referenced and used for further analysis or comparison with other data sources [6].

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Returnee Students as Teachers

The focus of this study is on returnee student teachers who are actively teaching at various institutions, as they possess insights into the curriculum models of these institutions and are knowledgeable about existing issues. This group is referred to as "mainline teachers".[7]

Questions

How many years of experience do you have working or collaborating with portfolio guidance institutions? How many institutions have you worked with? Are you a full-time or part-time teacher?

2. In your teaching role, what kind of support do various institutions provide you with? Do you require additional support?

3. What challenges have you encountered in your teaching role?

4. Do you need to collaborate with other teachers in your teaching role? Have you encountered any challenges during collaborative efforts?

5. How many students do you handle each year? What do you consider an appropriate number of students to handle?

6. Have the institutions you previously collaborated with offered opportunities for curriculum development, seminars, or teacher exchanges?

7. Have you ever experienced wage deductions in your previous collaborations with institutions?

8. Apart from the portfolio aspect, have there been any issues in the students' application process?

In this survey, the first six questions are aimed at investigating potential teaching-related issues, while the last two questions pertain to institutional inquiries. This section of the questionnaire will also be widely distributed, targeting teachers with years of experience in the industry and an in-depth understanding of its workings. For the third part of the questions, teachers can choose to answer based on their interests and areas of expertise; answering every question is not mandatory. Of course, if there are other issues not covered by the questions but teachers wish to express their opinions, they are free to do so.

TABLE 1: nterviews with Teachers.

Number	Undergraduate University	Master University	Years of Experience	Numberof Students Taught	Part-time/full-time	Designer Experience
T 1	Edinburgh University	Royal College of Ar	4	25	Full time	None
T2	Jiangnan University	University of the Arts London	8	7	Part-time	Less
T3	Beijing Film Academy	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology	5	26	Part-time	None
T4	Chongqing Normal University	Visual Communi-cation, New Yor	5	38	Part-time	Less
T5	Sichuan University	Kyoto Seika University	2	9	Full-time	More
T6	South West University	Edinburgh University	4	27	Full time	More

On the whole, the art study portfolio industry faces a number of problems, including salary and remuneration, unstable working status, paperwork and management issues, which directly affect the application process and the quality of students' studies. t1 talked about the experience of a teacher who discovered the academic requirements and salary situation after entering the portfolio industry. t2 mentioned the working status and remuneration of part-time tutors, and pointed out that some T3 talks about the portfolio industry being hit hard in 2020, affecting both institutions and students. t4 mentions the challenges faced by one tutor. t5 illustrates the powerlessness of another tutor in a full-time and managerial position, and also describes the problems students encounter in the application process. At the same time, the epidemic and policy changes have had an impact on the industry as a whole, making the market more difficult. It is vital for students to choose the right institution and tutor, while for tutors to adapt to the

changes in the industry and improve their capabilities to provide better coaching and guidance to students.

Based on the feedback from teachers regarding issues with institutions, the summary is as follows:

1. Institutions do not provide much assistance to substitute teachers in terms of professional support. Teachers primarily enhance their skills on their own.

2. Some institutions have cases of delayed payment of teachers' salaries.

3. Due to the impact of the pandemic, there is a decrease in the number of students, leading to fierce competition in the industry. Some institutions are facing financial difficulties and closure due to a broken funding chain.

4. Portfolio institutions have a relatively short history, and they are also learning by trial and error, lacking experience.

5. The arrangement of foundational courses, such as software courses, is unreasonable.

6. The organization of institutions has problems. Apart from teaching, other aspects such as application processes have issues. Some institutions have teachers handling too many students, making it difficult to ensure quality.

3.2. Students

This study involves in-depth interviews with students of art study abroad institutions. Students are more attuned to their preferences for teachers and teaching methodologies that facilitate rapid progress. Importantly, their feedback provides valuable insights into their satisfaction levels with institutions and the issues they perceive.[8]

Questions

1. In the teaching process, what issues do you believe teachers face?

2. How proficient are you in using software? Where did you learn to use the software?

3. Regarding the institution's curriculum offerings, what suggestions do you have?

4. How do you think teachers can better instruct students?

5. One-on-one or group instruction? Online or in-person classes?

6. Apart from the above, what other issues do you believe exist within institutions?

The discussions and findings in this section provide a deeper understanding of the perspectives of both returnee student teachers and students. These insights shed light on the challenges and opportunities within the portfolio guidance industry in China.

TABLE 2: Interviews with Students.

No.	Undergraduate level	major	Country of application	Major of application	Received offer
S1	Second Class	Product Design	UK	Graphic Medium	Kingston
S2	First Class	Fine Art	UK	Industrial Design	London College of Communication
S3	Third Class	Graphic Design	USA	Graphic Design	Syracuse University
S4	211	Politics	UK	Illustration Design	Edinburgh University
S5	First Class	New Media	Australia	Interaction	RMIT
S6	Second Class	Decoration	New Zealand	Graphic Design	Auckland Polytechnic
S7	985	Branding Design	UK	University of Glasgow	Parsons School of Design
S8	211	Illustration	UK	Illustration	Royal College of Art
S9	Academy of Fine Arts	Fine Art	USA	Graphic Design	SVA
S10	C9	Design	USA	Interaction Design	Carnegie Mellon University
S11	985	Engineering	UK	Information Technology	UCL
S12	211	Design	give up	No	None
S13	First Class	Medicine	UK	Information design	Loughborough University
S14	Second Class	Art	Australia	Design	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
S15	211	Fashion design	UK	Graphic Design	Loughborough University
S16	211	Fashion design	UK	Graphic Design	Edinburgh University

S13, who studies at an portfolio institution in Beijing, said that although he attended a third-rate university and stayed at the Beijing institution for less than two months, the institution placed a serious and responsible teacher with him. However, with more than 30 students to teach, it is sometimes difficult to juggle the needs of each student. The relationship between the students was also not good, and he did not learn software related knowledge in school. He found the whole institution confusing, and despite the high standard of the teachers, the quality of his own work was not good.

S14 is a student at a middle school in a first-tier city. As he was studying at an art school, there was a school near the school where the teachers were exchange students from the UK. Later, problems arose between the portfolio institution and the teachers, who said they simply did not have enough time to work with students. The teacher is

a full-time teacher, and full-time teachers may encounter this problem when working at an institution with overenrollment, so more tasks are assigned to full-time teachers. Later, the student changed institutions.

S8 has a combination of online and offline one-on-one classes at the institution. He initially wanted to choose an offline institution because he felt more at ease with his teachers around. After a while, however, he realized there wasn't much difference between online and offline. Taking classes online also saves time traveling to and from school. At first, the institution asked the teacher to give a video lecture, but after two classes, he and the teacher went straight to voice, and the teacher relayed the information to him. The lessons were sometimes half an hour long, and sometimes the teacher would spend 20 minutes answering questions for him.

S12 says her agency offers paperwork and online application services, as well as portfolio tutoring, forming what it calls a one-stop shop. But the agency's paperwork is overpriced and riddled with loopholes and errors. For example, missing transcripts or filling out incorrect information.

In addition to S8, S12, S13 and S14, other problems mentioned by other students included: lagging information, with institutions failing to communicate important information in a timely manner, resulting in students missing deadlines; misleading studio advertisements, with studios advertised as communal areas of the teachers' office buildings, which were unsuitable for classes; inconsistencies in the quality of the institution's teaching, with teachers having poor qualifications; irresponsible advice from institutions; institutions accusing others of plagiarism while borrowing their work online; imbalanced fees, with students from the same background potentially facing different fees; inconsistent advice from portfolio teachers, with students not knowing who to listen to Unresponsible advice from institutions; accusations of plagiarism on the internet when institutions have borrowed work from others; unbalanced fees, where students from the same background may face different fees; inconsistent advice from teachers in combined institutions, and students' frustration at not knowing who to listen to.

These students' experiences and opinions reveal that there are various problems and shortcomings in China Art Portfolio Training Institutions. While some students had a good teaching experience, others expressed dissatisfaction with the service and quality of teaching at the institutions. The feedback from students shows that the standard of teachers in China Art Portfolio Training Institutions varies. Some teachers have not even been abroad and do not have a good grasp of the basic logic of a portfolio, but simply make irrelevant requests. During the interviews, students expressed their views on the problems of the institutions. Among the most common problems were the

limited teaching ability of the teachers and the unreasonable schedule of the institution's courses.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Overall, there are still several issues within China's portfolio guidance institutions that impact the success rate of students' applications to foreign universities.

Suggestions for Teacher Selection in Institutions:

Some teachers, despite graduating from prestigious universities, lack practical work experience and start teaching directly at institutions. Therefore, institutions need to raise their recruitment standards for talent. Teachers are the primary assets of these institutions, and as such, they should receive appropriate training, education, and incentives to better support the institution and provide high-quality teaching.

Researchers also found that teachers working and living in second- and third-tier cities often seek stable jobs like civil servants or middle and high school art teachers after completing their graduate studies. They might even engage in unrelated jobs, only teaching part-time at portfolio guidance institutions in their spare time, resulting in inconsistent teaching quality.

Recommendations for Other Aspects of Portfolio Guidance Institutions:

Firstly, it's suggested that portfolio guidance institutions adopt a business model that collaborates with design companies. This would allow study abroad guidance teachers to double as designers, enhancing students' design capabilities. Additionally, there's a need for more emphasis on long-term design exercises in teaching that align with market demands.

Institutions should also familiarize themselves with university curriculum offerings. Some university students lack even basic software skills. To provide better services and gain a competitive edge, understanding customer needs is essential.

Some teachers juggle multiple institutions, making portfolio guidance institutions intermediaries between teachers. In such cases, there's a lack of supervision. Full-time institution staff mainly handle enrollment, promotion, contract signing with clients, and have a relatively smaller role in the teaching process, largely depending on the professionalism and dedication of part-time teachers. Moreover, training and communication between teachers are limited. It is advisable for institutions to organize regular design exchange events.

Furthermore, institutions should pay due attention to issues like delayed salaries, the careful selection of cooperative institutions, and excessive teacher-student representation in applications.

These recommendations address various aspects of portfolio guidance institutions, aiming to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of the industry.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] Ge H. Reflections on the logical thinking in design and design education. New Fine Arts; 2016(4).

[2] Lü B. A brief discussion on the reform of art and design education. Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute: Fine Arts and Design Edition. 2016;2016(4).

[3] Xiong Y, You F. Information visualization and visual design. Art and Design (Theory). 2022;05:40–42.

[4] Manion C. (1984). "Issues and solutions in graphic design education in colleges and universities." 2013, 03.

[5] Potton (2002). Explorations in graphic design education. Economic Technical Cooperation Information; 2002(21).

[6] Burns. (2010). "On the existing problems and corresponding strategies in graphic design education." Education and Vocation, 2013, 06.

[7] Zang Y. Several considerations in teaching and practice within design studios. Journal of Shandong Vocational College of Economics and Technology. 2018;2018(4).

[8] Meng S. (2014). "Research on problems and countermeasures in university students' graphic design education." Dance, 2014, 01.