



## Case Study 17: University of Hertfordshire

### Bringing AI into Creative Courses

#### What issue were we trying to address and why?

In the standard timeline for Higher Education (HE) course proposal, design and eventual validation there are often conflicts between frenetic technological development and the more rigorous but ponderous pace of university processes.

We are familiar with technology-led courses needing a flexible approach to how they are written - mentioning specific contemporary technical processes can quickly become a hostage to fortune, as developments move substantially faster than even annual reviews.

The decision was made to expand the University of Hertfordshire's School of Creative Arts Postgraduate (PG) Media framework provision - currently a stable of four courses Animation, Concept Art, Digital Media Arts and Games Art) - into the area of AI. This framework has been successful, especially with the Rookies School Annual rankings. University of Hertfordshire (UH) are ranked second in the world for the subject of Animation.

The issue to be addressed was pretty quotidian- a new technological area was opening up and should be reflected as part of the suite of creative media.

#### What we did

In December 2024 we completed validation. This case-study looks at some of the challenges and issues with launching a new MA in AI and the particular affordances of that subject. Peter Drucker supposedly opined "Culture eats business for breakfast" and this was very much our experience on this course design journey.

The internal marketing report to investigate the viability of such a course wasn't favourable, and this raised the first spectre; that of scope. People read the possibility and virility of AI from their own domain knowledge, and our University unsurprisingly read it from a computer science viewpoint. It could be argued that's where AI had languished culturally since the 1958 Dartmouth Conference.

Nomenclature is always difficult for any emerging tech but the suggestion that the course needed to be named Artificial Intelligence rather than AI (on the assumption that potential applicants wouldn't know what it stood for) was tenuous even back in mid-2024. One can understand why; there was a long history of MSc postgraduate courses in the sciences long before we creative artists had access to the tools. However, we realised we weren't proposing an Artificial Intelligence course anyway, but a Generative AI course. It was a Masters of Art (MA), and our stakeholders were what is often referred to as the 'Creative Industries'.

We learnt we needed to frame the course as part of our screen industry-centric philosophy, so requested the name change to "Creative AI for Screen" as opposed to the rather lengthy "Artificial Intelligence for Games and Animation" which we sensed had built-in obsolescence

and lacked the sort of multidisciplinary perspective needed, as well as the potential of cannibalizing our existing courses.

Surprisingly we also found there was an unexpected coyness and lack of engagement from business. This had multiple causes. Some companies felt being identified as using or even investigating the area was a PR problem as customers would automatically think you were all about automation and sweeping efficiencies, interested solely in a new digital Taylorism. We also identified a fear that due to the 'black box' nature of these new tools operating in the cloud, data breaches of client work, and exposure of proprietary tools were seen as a threat. Additionally, there were worries that a later retro-engineering of these black boxes after a range of court cases around perceived copyright theft would leave these companies exposed legally. There were many perverse incentives to work against the obvious business benefits of engagement. So, companies were often coy and cautious about their support.

### **Who was involved**

We quickly developed a triumvirate of Industry, University QA and what I'd call a Showrunner (taken from episodic tv), a single person who can formulate a vision and direction for a nebulous area!

Some friction would also come from applicants and students themselves, and many resources were directed to communicating intent. The trope of AI Large Language Models fed on artists work without their permission, with the purpose of replacing those same artists' hard-won careers was a powerful one. Students who had just spent three years of honing a craft in the arts were receiving strong messages of robots taking their jobs and were viewing amazing visuals on social media that suggested mass creative unemployment. Messages from a recent BFI conference (AI Creative Summit 2024) where companies were talking about how AI skills will be 'additive' in terms of jobs were not penetrating.

We had a lot of explaining to do, re-educating potential applicants.

In a response to these challenges, we developed our 'Team Human' philosophy (Douglas Rushkoff's book of the same name was our inspiration). This carries the notion that it wasn't about 'humans in the loop' as often quoted, but rather the pro-active and imaginative human control of generative processes that was important. We premised the course around artist-led pipelines and unique workflows via experimentation of new daisy-chains of software. We eschewed the narrow caricature of lazy prompt engineering in exchange for creative and analytical humanist design possibly creating a new literacy. This polemic gave the course some clarity; a Masters of Art (MA) in a sea of MScs.

### **Measures of success**

These are different for the stakeholders. The University wants the advantages of scale where a new subject slots into an existing framework.

The industry wants reassurance that graduates can help them identify elegant efficiencies in pipelines and workflows that they are probably too close to see.

Tutors want to seize a moment before everything is standardised and, in that gap, create a new type of designer or artist.

It remains to be seen if these exigencies can co-exist. It is easy to theorise before a course has started and none of these stakeholders existed maybe two years ago.

### **How do you plan to develop the intervention/activity?**

It may be a cop out to suggest this will happen organically, but we are wary. Certainly, this will be an intensely collaborative space with new emergent design methodologies. As a parallel, in the 90s there was a scramble to accommodate the wave of new digital technologies into art courses- the prefix Digital was added to many HE courses. Out went the Steinbeck film reel editors and in came the Avid or Lightworks computers, out went photography wet rooms, in came Adobe Photoshop. People DID lose their jobs, but the job market grew.

Generative AI will very soon be embedded everywhere - as the new normal. We forget Chat GPT only launched in November 2022. It remains to be seen if Universities can cope with the possibilities of such change. We take heart from the fact that the first Animation Degree was launched in 1972, and now it's a 1.6bn industry in the UK. Someone took a risk.