
All My Friends Are Here

Four initial case studies on student design agencies

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In 1999, the small, but rather well-known German town of Weimar was to become the Cultural Capital of Europe. In preparation for this major international event, as far back as 1996 the Bauhaus-University Weimar – one of the leading local cultural institutions – had set up a student agency, Ideenwerkstatt '99 (Ideas Workshop '99) to initiate, coordinate and realise pilot projects leading up to the climactic festival program in 1999.

From its establishment, the Ideenwerkstatt '99 was located in a fairly large hall of a university-owned condemned building, managed by a young administrative officer assigned by the university, who supervised a core group of eight part-time student freelancers and an unaccounted number of project-related student helpers. Other than the administrative officer's salary, the office space and some initial office equipment, the university didn't allocate much further funding to the operation of the project; the Ideenwerkstatt essentially needed to compete for internal and/or external funding and/or grants, or otherwise produce its own income.

When the Ideenwerkstatt closed down at the end of the summer of 1999 it had co-produced:

- An international architectural competition including an international preparatory workshop for a town-planning project called *neues bauen am horn* (1996)
- The architecture exhibition, KulturStadtBauen, which toured Europe for two years (1997–98) as a promotional warm-up to the Cultural Capital year
- A full-scale TV studio for the broadcasting of the 100-day festival TV program, *worldhausTV* (1999)
- A series of international symposia called *campus 99* (1999)
- A number of smaller exhibitions of student projects and similar events in local venues (1998–99).

As a side-project for income-generation, the Ideenwerkstatt also became very involved with the university's general visual communications, and at some point it was effectively the institutional communications bureau.

Of the eight core student members of the Ideenwerkstatt, all but one became creative entrepreneurs immediately after their graduation from university; five are still successful design entrepreneurs today, two proceeded to become university professors.

I am one of the latter.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN HONG KONG

Based on my own rather beneficial experience as a student member of a student design agency in the 1990s in Germany, it came quite naturally to me to suggest setting up a university-related student design agency when I took up my current position as a full-time faculty member of Hong Kong Baptist University's (HKBU) newly founded Academy of Visual Arts (AVA) in 2006.

In 1999, the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Mr Tung Chee-Hwa, set the goal of transforming Hong Kong into a cultural metropolis. His policy address prompted the realisation that arts education would be a major factor within this transformation (Kao & Lu 2002), and, inevitably, arts education at tertiary level came under the spotlight. Several institutions and the university responded to the new policy focus by enhancing their visual arts programs in terms of both quantity and professionalism – the founding of the Academy of Visual Arts by HKBU in 2005 was, for example, a direct result of this policy.

This first reform in visual arts education was followed by the more recent policy, established by Mr Donald Tsang, the second Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR, of developing Hong Kong towards a knowledge-based economy. This second policy specifically included a call to offer diversified learning paths for young talents in creative competence and professionalism by enhancing educational activities while also tying them in with industry (Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre 2007, pp. 12–13).

As a result of these macro policy developments, the number of visual artists with professional qualifications from Hong Kong tertiary institutions has almost tripled since 2001, relieving to some extent the immediate demand for visual arts professionals. However, this development has led to new problems: new graduates in the visual arts in Hong Kong, like their peers in other disciplines, generally have traditional expectations of their future jobs (projectable career paths, steady income, job security, etc.) – particularly because of their family and social backgrounds – which do not match well with the professional realities of the creative and cultural sector. Thus, graduates will often seek employment in other industries, and are ultimately lost to the creative sector. Yet, at the same time, creative industries and cultural institutions continue to urge more art administration and creative talents to enter the creative market as a means to enrich the cultural landscape of the city.

This leads to a paradoxical situation: the current generation of young visual artists, the so-called 'post-80s generation', finished their tertiary education in the visual arts, which they chose in good faith because of the new public policies, positive public awareness and real market demand, in 2008 and later, and were immediately challenged by the current economic downturn and a society too rigid and suffocating to allow for alternative career concepts (HKindieFF 2010).

This general situation is also reflected in the particular experience of the Academy of Visual Arts in recent times: AVA graduates approximately 100 young visual artists from its BA program every year. Other tertiary programs of a similar nature at AVA's sister institutions in Hong Kong – for example, City University's School of Creative Media, Chinese University's Department of Fine Arts, Polytechnic University's School of Design – release an additional 300 or so BA graduates annually into the job market.

Unfortunately, the majority of these young creative talents do not enter the cultural and creative sector, often seeking employment in entirely different industries or in services merely supplementary to the visual arts. For example, of AVA's graduates in 2010, 56 per cent entered the commerce/industry sector, followed by education (33 per cent) and community/social services (11 per cent). Only slightly more than 40 per cent of the graduates who found full-time jobs defined their employment as 'in art or design related industry' (Academy of Visual Arts 2008, 2009, 2010).

Additional data from these exit surveys of the first three cohorts of AVA graduates in 2008–2010 suggest that only a minority of 10 per cent of these graduates intend and are determined to start up as visual arts entrepreneurs, whether within a self-established corporate structure, self-employment, or freelance. This adds up to about 10 AVA graduates and about 40 graduates Hong Kong wide in 2013; for a community of 7 million inhabitants, with a per capita GDP of approximately US\$36 000 (International Monetary Fund 2012), in close geographical, political and cultural proximity to a vast mainland Chinese market, this is a remarkably small number, particularly considering that in other countries a large proportion of creative graduates usually choose to work entrepreneurially (for example, in the UK 28 per cent across all creative occupations (Higgs, Cunningham & Bakhshi 2008); see also Ball, Pollard & Stanley (2010), in particular their concluding remarks on pages 216–219).

Reasons stated by those graduates who chose not to become full-time visual artists seldom place responsibility for their decision with public policies or social pressures, and instead consistently cite – besides the perceived low salary level of creative jobs and the unstable professional situation – other factors: a majority claims insufficient professional skills or doubts in their own abilities compared to perceived professional standards as reasons not to continue their careers in the visual arts. Others worry about

the lack of professional exposure during their study years and competition from graduates with overseas qualifications (Benz & Ng 2011).

While, on the one hand, these creative talents are steering clear of the creative industries, on the other, AVA continues to receive a fair amount of demand from the industry in general, businesses and/or private persons looking for support with various creative issues. These businesses – mostly small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and non-government organisations (NGOs) – do not want or cannot afford to hire a visual artist full-time, yet they are interested in the knowledge/skills that AVA and its graduates/students as creatives have to offer. This first-hand observation of demand is also supported by, for example, Hong Kong SAR's government prediction of further growth in the cultural and creative sectors in Hong Kong in the coming years, as well as its initiative to support knowledge transfer from universities to SMEs through additional specifically allocated funding (Hong Kong SAR Government 2013).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The situation in Hong Kong indicates that there is demand from the student side for professional on-job experience as well as for development of entrepreneurial skills and 'spirit', while at the same time there is demand from businesses and industry for the particular knowledge that AVA has to offer. The question remains: how can the Academy of Visual Arts meet these demands?

As AVA's primary mission is of an educational nature, the obvious initial answer might be to integrate external projects into courses and classes. However, as many educators in the creative disciplines have experienced, formal classroom settings are fundamentally different from 'real life practice' in the creative industry. As one case study on industry–design school cooperation in Canada put it, 'the results [of the proposed project] had to satisfy certain project constraints defined by the [industry] client in response to the specific corporate history, socio-cultural context, and business climate. These constraints were site-specific and not readily generalised. Likewise, neither the extent of the mandate nor the scope of the project were clearly defined or understood at the outset' (Poldma & Samuelson 2004, p. 60).

In the contemporary educational landscape where students are bound by term schedules and study plans, courses are built around specific program and course-level Intended Learning Outcomes and programs need to account for their learning outcomes to Quality Assurance Committees. Continuous and recurring integration – that is, beyond the one-off collaboration purpose-designed for particular case studies – of complex and meaningful real-life professional experiences in courses is almost impossible to achieve. The AVA thus needed to think of a more experimental model to systematically incorporate on-job experiences in its educational offerings.

This is where the idea of an agency as an entity ‘to organise transactions between two other parties’ (Oxford Dictionary n.d.) came into play. In principle, such an agency could be formulated along the model lines of knowledge transfer partnerships (KTPs) as they are adopted by numerous tertiary institutions today (see, for example, Hong Kong Baptist University n.d.; Kingston University n.d.; UCL Advances n.d.): a student or a group of students (associates) works on the assignment of a client (external partner) within the community of AVA (academic partner).

By the mid-2000s the idea of a student design agency was by no means novel; however, it appeared that the establishment of such an agency in Hong Kong had never been attempted. In the summer of 2010, I therefore proposed to HKBU’s Knowledge Transfer Office to conduct a feasibility study for the founding of a student design agency specific to the HK context. This proposed Knowledge Transfer feasibility study would be produced in collaboration with the Department of Strategy, Marketing and Entrepreneurship of the Business School of Kingston University London (Benz & Ng 2011).

On the way to constructing the feasibility study, I stumbled across a more fundamental issue concerning student-led design agencies. As a first step, my research assistant at the time and I had attempted to investigate student design agencies worldwide: Where are they? How are they set up? What are their (business) activities? How are they operated/managed? What kind of experience do they provide for students/graduates? How do they tie in – if at all – with the educational mission of their parent institution? However, we encountered an ‘information void’: we could not locate any publications other than the odd newspaper note about student-run design agencies, let alone any academic (case) studies about their history, set-up and/or achievements. Apparently, student design agencies had not been a topic for academic investigation or reflection, despite them being fairly common in the contexts of design institutions worldwide.

As it subsequently turned out, it was also difficult to find, locate and contact any student design agencies directly: the entities we were interested in are run by students, which implies that their staff is, by definition, doubly burdened by their studies and their agency work. And it follows that answering odd interview requests by strange academics would not be of major interest to them.

In addition, student agencies could be assumed to face a high fluctuation of members, unclear hierarchies, unsystematic record-keeping, and variable prioritisation of tasks. Often our emailed contact requests were passed around several times within an agency before we eventually received a (negative) reply. Taking into account also that student design agencies often do not spend too much time on updating their websites and/or checking their general mailbox, and that there is no commonly accepted taxonomy – what is a student design agency in one place may well be a visual communications office or an ideas workshop in another

– or definition of suitable/acceptable activities for student design agencies available, our research efforts became increasingly erratic and cumbersome.

Despite this frustrating experience, we were eventually able to locate four student design agencies, which were prepared to share their experiences and thus help answer three principal questions:

- 1 Can student design agencies be agents for disseminating specific knowledge/skills from the creative field to the wider community? That is, can they principally be viewed as possible models for knowledge transfer?
- 2 Are student design agencies valid entities to provide recurring on-job experiences for students in creative subjects – do they produce educational value?
- 3 Which parameters influence the quality of the educational experience of a student design agency?

All four cases that follow are based on interviews conducted between November 2012 and January 2013 as part of a follow-up investigation triggered by the findings – or, rather, lack of findings – from the initial research. In the first three cases the current agency heads responded to a detailed questionnaire and answered further individual follow-up questions by email/Skype to clarify any remaining issues (see interviews: Lindig 2012; Nguyen 2012; Quiring 2012; Yaw 2012).

Case 1: Töchter + Söhne GmbH, Universität der Künste, Berlin, Germany

In 1999, towards the end of the projected operation of the Ideenwerkstatt '99 in Weimar, its student members – amongst them myself – were discussing how to possibly preserve and institutionalise what we at the time considered a fundamentally important study experience for ourselves.

During our discussions we were also aware of events in Berlin, where only recently students of the 'Gesellschafts und Wirtschaftskommunikation (GWK)' ('Communication in Social and Economic Contexts') program (Universität der Künste Berlin n.d.) of the then College of the Arts (renamed in 2001 as the 'University of the Arts') had founded their own design agency, which they called 'Töchter + Söhne' ('Daughters & Sons').

Töchter + Söhne was founded as a Limited Company (*Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung*) by another student association of the Universität der Künste (UdK) – the Berliner Kommunikationsforum e.V. – which also provided the legally necessary financial endowment. Structurally and financially, Töchter + Söhne was thus entirely independent from its parent institution from the start.

Nevertheless, from its very beginnings in 1999 until its closing in 2011, the agency maintained institutional connections with its parent institution, for example, by inviting the university president / other faculty members to sit on its advisory board.

Other than through such administrative connections, the college, until 2009, provided office/studio space on campus, which allowed various faculty to informally drop in every now and then to provide academic and professional consultations and effectively – intentionally or not – a very loose form of supervision.

While not directly institutionalised in any ordinance, such informal exchange with staff members as well as the close geographical/personal relationship with the university/college essentially reflected the initial founding idea of Töchter + Söhne: according to an interview given to *Unispiegel* magazine in 2000 (Kolbeck 2000), the four founding members were not primarily interested in generating any particular business, because they instead felt they lacked the professional skills necessary to achieve this. Founding an agency was their attempt to respond to this perceived need, which was apparently shared by many other students, made evident by the subsequent continuously strong participation in Töchter + Söhne.

In the early years, the vast majority of participants in the agency were active students from UdK – mostly from GWK and the Visual Communications programs. Graduates would not usually be allowed to join or continue working for the agency, although there were some exceptions. Over the following years – due to the spreading ‘fame’ of Töchter + Söhne – more students of other universities in Berlin joined the team as ‘freelancers’ until it reached its maximum size of 20 ‘permanent freelancers’ in 2008. Nevertheless, throughout its operational time at least the CEOs – usually a team of two students who deferred their studies for one or two years to dedicate themselves full-time to the agency – would always be UdK students.

The agency provided a large range of communication, research and design services, for example, product development, strategic marketing, store concepts, web applications and interface design. Its clients varied in sector and size, though from the start Töchter + Söhne managed to attract numerous high-profile clients. For example, one of its first clients was the OTTO group, the world’s largest mail order group; later, their portfolio included also Techniker Krankenkasse, Universal Entertainment, Senate of Berlin, Amnesty International and Deutsche Telekom (Töchter + Söhne n.d.). Thus, very early on in its institutional history the agency was playing ‘the big game’.

In this context, it is remarkable that Töchter + Söhne didn’t formally compete in pitching to acquire clients; all of its commissions were picked up only through direct contact, word of mouth and/or its reputation. In this regard, especially in the early years, Töchter + Söhne benefited from their clients’ willingness to support young professionals, despite the potential ‘risks’ that came with hiring a student-run agency instead of a ‘proper’ professional agency. However, being associated with a particularly new and young agency did in effect ‘rub off’ on the reputation of the clients, and allowed them to reposition their image to the public.

Interestingly, because of the clients' commitment to the 'cause' of supporting young creatives, Töchter + Söhne could afford to charge market prices, arguing that the outcomes produced were of the same quality as could be expected from other providers, and should therefore command the same price.

This willingness on the clients' part to commission a student design agency *and* pay normal market prices, while Töchter + Söhne paid its members student rates (Kolbeck 2000) equivalent to the German minimum wage, was essentially the core to Töchter + Söhne's economic success. Töchter + Söhne were thus able to continuously generate very significant reputational kudos, along with rather handsome annual financial profits, which were in turn donated to UdK to be invested in program delivery.

While the possibility to earn some money through study-related work was of course certainly an incentive for students to join the agency, other aspects of participation were at least equally important: for example, often students close to graduation would join to generate some on-job experience and projects to boost their application portfolios. Also, student members of the agency consistently emphasised the team experience and the various 'soft rewards' – reputational gain for students who were accepted to participate, use of facilities and resources, and the apparently significant fun of working there.

In the end, the closure of Töchter + Söhne was not triggered by economic issues, but by changes in the educational landscape: when the UdK began implementing the 'Bologna Reform', which in Germany resulted in new program structures with previously uncommon BA and MA degrees and shortened study times, students faced harsher schedules, penalties for deferring studies and more streamlined study paths. This meant that the on-average younger and less mature bachelor students did not bring the skill sets and levels of experience to the job to accomplish the complex and challenging tasks of the agency's daily business (Töchter + Söhne n.d.). Because of the potential failure to maintain work quality, and as the university couldn't see the possibility of integrating the agency into the new educational structure, Töchter + Söhne's stakeholders decided to close the agency in 2011, after 12 years in operation.

Despite its closure, Töchter + Söhne still has an almost legendary reputation today, especially amongst German design students, as a student-run design agency that for a while managed to operate on the same playing field as the 'big ones'. Of the agencies I looked into for this project, Töchter + Söhne certainly is the one that managed most successfully to emulate professional practice in its activities, to the point of appearing almost as a 'normal' professional agency.

Case 2: werbeliebe e.V., University of Applied Arts, Pforzheim, Germany

Unbeknown to me at the time, around the same time in 1998 as Töchter + Söhne was established in Berlin, another group of

students founded a student design agency at their College for Applied Sciences (now renamed Pforzheim University) in the provincial city of Pforzheim in southern Germany.

In contrast to their counterpart in Berlin, they registered as an independent association, C-Werk e.V. (*eingetragener Verein*, or 'registered association') – later renamed werbeliebe e.V. (translates roughly as 'advertising love'). This is a German legal structure, which requires the organisation to be non-profit-making. According to its ordinance, the association's sole purpose is 'professional education and training in the area of marketing communication', and such an association will 'offer its members educational opportunities through lectures, discussion panels, seminars, and practical work experiences' (werbeliebe e.V. 1998).

What started off as a very clear-cut, purpose-driven agency with an educational focus developed over the years to become a more complex entity with several divisions. Today, along with the original agency, the association, for example, publishes a university magazine called *MD – Marketing Digest*, runs another student agency specialising in video productions and organises the annual two-day marketing conference 'REFILL – the brand event'.

Similarly to Töchter + Söhne, werbeliebe is supported by its parent institution through provision of an on-campus office space, and is informally supported by academic staff through consultations and/or professional contacts. Unlike Töchter + Söhne, werbeliebe does not have any structural relations with its university through its ordinance. Its board of three directors is entirely made up of students, as are the lower ranks of project leaders, team leaders and team members.

While werbeliebe's business activities are similar to those of other student agencies (projects for external partners, university internal projects and self-initiated projects), they appear a little more diverse than, for example, those of Töchter + Söhne, if not in content, then in size and profile. Also, werbeliebe's management seems to have slightly more control over which projects it will take on. For example, while werbeliebe initially took on rather large industry clients like Daimler, they gradually – and apparently purposefully – developed their clientele as non-profit/charity organisations with smaller, open-ended projects. In addition, self-initiated projects with an educational focus, such as their own marketing magazine and marketing conference mentioned above, which have educational benefits to the university community at large, form a larger part of their activities than those of their counterpart in Berlin.

Today, at any given time, 30 to 40 students – who by default have to become members of the association – work for the agency, usually initially as 'team members', gradually growing into more senior leadership positions. Such gradual promotion ensures a continuity of development as well as allowing time to familiarise 'newbies' with the association's operations and people, which in turn nurtures team spirit and maintains quality of their output.

A very interesting aspect to note in this context is that werbeliebe does not pay its members/freelancers; indeed, by ordinance it is prohibited to do so (werbeliebe e.V. 1998). All work, time and effort contributed to the agency are entirely voluntary. In fact, participants even pay an annual – nominal – membership fee, which creates the slightly paradoxical situation that the students effectively pay to work on projects that often generate income or even profit. Despite this seemingly unfavourable scenario, the agency doesn't have problems recruiting new participants, as acceptance as a member apparently enhances the member's reputation. Further, even more than at Töchter + Söhne, non-monetary incentives, such as satisfaction from projects, passion for the discipline, educational benefits, a strong team spirit, social networks and activities seem to outweigh the lack of financial compensation. Participation in werbeliebe is rewarded through formal certificates and, in special cases, reference letters by staff members. More generally, however, werbeliebe throughout its history apparently has managed to generate a kind of self-renewing 'corporate spirit' that appeals directly to the professional enthusiasm and personal dedication of its members.

Compared to Töchter + Söhne, werbeliebe remains closer to its roots as a student-run agency in terms of its (business) activities, its engagement with the community, its operations and the personnel involved. It is more clearly dedicated to an educational mission, and its various activities are aimed more at fulfilling this than at 'playing the professional game', claiming awards and/or gaining more than a local/regional reputation.

Case 3: Penn Student Design, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

Student agencies in the USA principally have a different historical background from their European counterparts as they can be traced back – very broadly – to the cooperative education initiative of Cincinnati University's Hermann Schneider (Park 1943) in the early years of the 20th century and Roosevelt's subsequent National Youth Administration (NYA) of the 1930s (Lindley & Lindley 1938). The NYA can be viewed as an early incarnation of the Federal Work–Study Program of today (University of Pennsylvania n.d.), a federally funded support system in the USA that assists students with the costs of post-secondary education by helping them earn financial funding through a part-time work program. Work–Study today is offered through 'student agencies' at around 3400 colleges and universities in the USA (US Department of Education n.d.), providing on-campus part-time jobs ranging from bartending and waiting, to removal services and storage provision, bicycle rentals and gift shop operation, and may of course also include various design services.

Due to their nature as articulations of a federal program primarily intended to financially support students in need, these student design agencies generally differ from those previously discussed in several ways:

- The student agencies execute a state-run program and therefore are required to adhere to regulations and guidelines that come with it, including of course regular accounting, taxation reporting, etc. This in many cases results in the parent institution being required to (tightly) supervise the agencies, despite the agencies nominally being ‘managed’ by students. As the agencies are specifically mandated and financed for the purpose of supporting student earning, their principal existence is not a matter of entrepreneurial consideration, although their range of services may develop to some extent.
- Student participants must be paid – by federal requirement – at least the federal minimum wage throughout their (formal) employment, making participation far more of a ‘regular job’ than a voluntary professional experience borne out of personal enthusiasm.
- Participation of students is means tested, thus it does not necessarily reflect interest, ability or enthusiasm of the employed student for the particular job.
- Activities of the agencies are usually more ‘introversive’, that is, they are directly aimed at the particular university/college community. Local/state government would certainly object if federally funded student services directly competed with ‘normal’ local businesses in the area, potentially threatening their existence due to the student services’ subsidised sub-market prices.

Penn Student Design (PSD) was established in about 2002 – an exact date can’t be given due to lack of records and loss of contact with its original cast – by students interested in offering design services to the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. For the larger part of its operation PSD remained an independent student group until, due to increasing administrative and operational pressures, it – albeit reluctantly – joined Penn Student Agencies (PSA), the institutional umbrella organisation for the Work–Study program, in 2011.

Since then, PSA provides PSD and other student agencies with a common office, a general manager and various office resources. It also manages general administrative tasks – legal contracts, payment of bills and salaries, etc. – thus effectively taking control of many of the entrepreneurially ‘sensitive’ issues of running a business.

Penn Student Design currently employs a staff of approximately 20 students, offering design services for posters, flyers, logos and/or websites, as well as photography services for events, portraits, architecture etc. mainly to university departments and student groups. Designers are paid a project-based fee, receiving 80 per cent of the income generated from a commission, the remaining 20 per cent going to the PSD as overheads. PSD thus far has not developed any self-initiated projects and/or events, except for an annual photo competition that leads to the production of a calendar, the sales of which

generate the major part of PSD's revenue. In view of this revenue distribution, PSD effectively depends on support from PSA to be economically sustainable.

In contrast to all other student design agencies investigated during this research, PSD is the only one that cannot generate and/or maintain the common enthusiasm of a 'design club' and is challenged by 'the lack of investment by the designers' (Nguyen, interview, 2012), who generally appear not to care much about the agency or their involvement with it. In effect, this want of commitment strips PSD of the social experience that contributes substantially to the success of the other student design agencies. This becomes further apparent through the non-existence of any member/alumni network, the lack of ties to any specific department – and thereby lack of academic ties and benefits – as well as through the absence of formal recognition of contribution. Participation in PSD is effectively a straightforward means of earning money, not for anything else.

Case 4: CREATIVE, IACT, Selangor, Malaysia

CREACTIVE student agency, based in Selangor on the western outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was the only case available for investigation in a developing economy. It was founded in 2002 as a division of IACT College – formerly known as the Institute Advertising Communication Training – a local provider of vocational sub-degree programs in visual communications subjects, not unlike community colleges in the USA or Hong Kong.

As IACT's roots reach back to the early 1970s when it was a joint educational institution of the Malaysian Advertisers' Association (MAA) and the Association of Accredited Advertising Agents (4As), Malaysia, it traditionally had close relations with the advertising industry, in particular, and prided itself in 'producing job-ready graduates for advertising agencies (IACT College, Overview n.d.). Accordingly, a student design agency, where (selected) students could practise their skills on the job, seemed a rather natural fit, so not surprisingly CREATIVE was not a student initiative originally – unlike the other cases – but an institutional reaction to external industry demand.

Since its inception a decade ago, CREATIVE has remained an integral part of the institutional structure, and the agency's activities have been much more directly related to the educational purpose of the parent institution than in the other cases. Consequently, in contrast to the previously discussed cases, CREATIVE has been led by a volunteer – that is, unpaid – academic staff member.

Given this structure, institutional control of the agency's activities is intentionally much more obvious than in the other cases: not only does the academic staff member supervise the entire design process, she also is present at meetings with clients and initiates and organises activities, and is in charge of agency operations and audits the books, etc. This set-up clearly explains

the relatively low (public) impact of the agency, as CREATIVE is only one of many responsibilities of the staff member – and an unpaid one too – and most likely her attention is limited.

Currently, approximately 20 students work for CREATIVE on external projects, generally from local SMEs, NGOs and/or community initiatives, and internal jobs for IACT's own special events. Projects usually are in line with the educational profile of IACT – that is, advertising oriented – which allows the agency to tie in with the educational purpose of the institution.

Participants are selected through a formal selection procedure involving a portfolio review and usually an interview, though effectively no particular requirements/restrictions are outlined, and positions are offered as available and at the adviser's discretion. Upon leaving, CREATIVE students receive a formal Certificate of Participation and a testimonial from the agency leader, which they may use for their CV.

Particular services offered by CREATIVE are specified as 'advertisements, marketing research, marketing & branding consultancy, and corporate identity' (IACT College, Student AD Agency n.d.). No official price lists are available, but generally prices are calculated at 30–50 per cent of the local market price. CREATIVE has its own account under the college and all revenue can be used for its own purposes, in particular for office equipment and agency activities.

Similarly to werbeliebe, student participants are not paid a salary for their work at CREATIVE, which also explains why no graduates can afford to stay on the team, as is the situation in the other cases. However, CREATIVE does provide free professional development workshops, organises parties and other team experiences, and even occasionally offers leisure trips (even to Bali), financed from the agency's revenue. These activities constitute staff-led team-building, and inject social meaning into life at CREATIVE, which then becomes an incentive for participation.

While not the official institutional understanding, CREATIVE does not see itself solely as an advertising agency with additional educational merit, but identifies with the community projects for which it provides design services. Within CREATIVE's social context, this appears to be a rather adequate reinterpretation of the idea of a design agency.

COMPARISON AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the relatively accidental or circumstantial selection of the above cases, it appears that the four agencies under review do share a number of critical traits that allow them to be compared with validity:

- All four agencies were founded within a relatively small window of four years, between 1998 and 2002, and have been operating continuously for a minimum of 10 years.

- All four agencies are directly related to one particular tertiary institution, are officially recognised by their parent institution and recruit their members more or less exclusively from its student body.
- All agencies under investigation generate business revenue through offering design services to the community.
- All agencies and their universities are located in thriving urban communities, providing similar opportunities as well as competition, though potentially at different economic levels.

Table 1: Comparison of the four agencies' primary parameters

	Töchter & Söhne (Germany)	werbeliebe (Germany)	PSD (USA)	CREACTIVE (Malaysia)
Organisation				
Years of operation	1999–2011 (12 years)	1998– (14 years)	2002– (11 years)	2002– (11 years)
Founding impetus	Student initiative	Student initiative	Federal government program	Institutional initiative
Organisational status	Limited company	Registered association (non-profit)	Institutional division	Institutional division
Management	2 students	3 students	2 students	1 staff member
Institutional support	Space	Space	Space, administrative overhead	Space, administrative overhead
Dedicated support staff	None	None	None	1 (unpaid)
Active student members	20 (max.)	40 (max.)	20 (approx.)	20 (approx.)
Operations				
Operational purpose	Professional development through on-job experience	'Professional education through practical work experiences'	Financial support of students through part-time work	On-job training
Business activities	'Communication, research and design services'	Advertising and marketing, visual communications services	Graphic design and photography services	'Advertisements, marketing research, marketing & branding consultancy, and corporate identity'
Other activities	n/a	Educational (lectures, workshops, conference, etc.)	None	Educational (lectures, workshops, etc.)
Target clients	Corporations, SMEs, NGOs	Mostly NGOS, some SMEs	Institutional community, private	NGOS, SMEs, institutional community
Service charges	Market price	Sub-market price	Sub-market price	Sub-market price
Student salary	Minimum wage	None	Project-based, but at least minimum wage	None
Institutional recognition	Participation could be counted for a required internship	None (yet the agency issues formal participation certificates)	None	Certificate of Participation and a testimonial
Other student incentives	On-job experience, team experience, use of facilities and resources, fun	On-job experience, team experience, use of facilities and resources, social and professional network, fun	On-job experience	On-job experience, team experience, fun
Operational sustainability	Yes	Yes	n/a	Yes

For comparison, Table 1 provides an overview of the essential parameters of the four agencies as established through the interviews.

With reference to the three research questions initially posed, the findings from the interviews indicate that student design agencies can indeed successfully transfer creative knowledge from an institution to a wider community. The simple fact that

all cases studied could generate significant income from external commissions over extended periods of time quite clearly shows that, whatever their services were, the external partners considered them worth the money they paid for them.

In all of the cases the identity of the agency was (at least partially) determined by their close association with a reputable academic institution; from the external partner's/client's point of view they would likely often be considered 'identical', with the agency being perceived merely as an administrative construct to manage the external assignments. It can be assumed that choosing a student design agency from a reputable institution would add value for clients as the credibility of the institution would 'spill over'.

In this scenario the students became the agents of communication and knowledge transfer between the institution and the external client. Interestingly, however, with the exception of CREATIVE and IACT, none of the other institutions and agencies seemed to grasp the potential of this notion for institutional communication, despite the various student design agencies – except possibly PSD – significantly contributing to a positive reception of the university, especially by the professional community, but also by the public at large.

Structurally, PSD's operations probably best match the classic knowledge transfer partnership (KTP), in essentially assigning single students or small groups of students to particular assignments without any extended activities; but PSD also seems to be the least successful agency in the study in terms of 'student satisfaction' and also financially, thus a classic knowledge transfer partnership may not be the ideal model for a student agency.

At the core of the foundation story of each case lies the idea of improving design education through providing students with opportunities for real-life professional experience. All four agencies achieve that: all of them allow professional exposure; all of them regularly produce interesting projects of good or very good quality for their clients; from all of them – with the exception possibly of PSD – their participants walk away with the impression of having had a very special experience and to have learnt important (professional) life lessons.

It is valid to assume the educational value in student design agencies, as the agencies studied simply wouldn't have survived for an extended period of time if students hadn't found them worth the time and effort. As in all of the cases the agencies paid no salary, or merely a minimum salary, the learning experience as perceived by the students was the most likely incentive for them to stay on.

Therefore, there seems good reason to confirm that there are positive educational effects; however, as none of the agencies kept systematic track of their alumni, further formal research will be required to determine, in particular, the qualitative outcomes of the agency experience. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence

to suggest that, if student design agencies were considered as knowledge transfer models, the conventional KTP model would need to be extended to include an educational element/module, aimed particularly at the KT associates (the students).

It seems the single most important criterion for the success of a student design agency is the 'spirit' it manages to create. Those agencies that succeed in creating an intensive working experience with a strong focus on social interaction in the team can induce motivation and enthusiasm for their cause to the point where it is more important than monetary incentive for the participants. As Tim Stübane, one of the first two CEOs of Töchter + Söhne, expressed in an interview: 'This is not merely a working place, this is the centre point of my life, and all my friends are here too [translation by author]' (Kolbeck 2000). Lukas Quiring of werbeliebe insists that 'community, network, experience, passion, fun' are the reasons that 'all students with above average motivation and talent will be active in the agency [translation by author]' (Quiring, interview, 2012). This observation very much matches my personal experience at Ideenwerkstatt '99, though at the time I didn't entirely realise the importance of the team experience as clearly.

The parameters that seem to trigger this student experience are relatively simple to achieve:

- Provision of an on-campus agency space. Such space needn't be particularly well equipped, but must allow room 'to hang out'. On-campus space asserts the agency's relationship with the parent institution and also locates it within the institutional community; however, it should not encourage the parent institution to 'patronise' the agency.
- Selection of student members of the agency should be formal, and participation should subsequently be acknowledged by some sort of certification. An interview and/or a portfolio assessment for participation creates the impression of exclusivity and enhances the quality of the participatory experience. The competitive edge that is implied seems to be more of a challenge than a deterrent to potential members. Also, the interview allows existing members to 'test' potential newcomers, thus ensuring at least a minimum of personal 'chemistry'.
- One incentive to participate in a student design agency is informal access to instructors, thus occasional consultations with members of staff and/or their participation in activities should be encouraged. An exchange with instructors over jobs will also assure the quality of the output of the agency and improve the learning experience of the students.
- The agency's activities should not be exclusively business driven. While on-job experience is of course one major purpose of a student design agency, this needs to be complemented by other activities (lectures, workshops, sharings, parties, movie evenings, trips). It is remarkable that a good percentage of student design agency projects are self-initiated and/or not-for-profit. It appears

that students will work for a cause just as much as for money, and this sentiment should be actively developed to foster their enthusiasm. After all, student agencies are not professional businesses, despite trying to emulate them.

CONCLUSION

The interviews conducted in the process of this research and the findings demonstrate the real potential of student design agencies as sustainable models for the transfer of specific creative knowledge and skills from academic institutions to the wider community. The findings show the benefits of the student agency for the institution, the client and the students, and highlight some points where conventional knowledge transfer models would need to be modified to maximise the impact, value and, ultimately, the meaning of the student design agency.

The case studies have outlined a variety of real-life options for setting up student design agencies, thus providing pathways to inform institutional practices in relation to student-led knowledge transfer initiatives. And finally, this project helped to work out the structure of AVA's own variation of a student design agency, which was launched in Hong Kong in September 2013 as the Young Artists Agency.

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INTERVIEWS

The four case studies above are based on interviews conducted with representatives of each of the agencies between November 2012 and January 2013. All interviews began by the representatives filling out a formal questionnaire, and then answering follow up questions through email, except in the case of CREATIVe in which the entire interview was conducted via Skype. Further information was obtained from websites and other sources as referenced.

Lindig, E, Töchter + Söhne, interview, 2012. Mr. Eric Lindig was the last CEO of Töchter + Söhne, from 2010 to 2011, and is the current liquidator of its remains. The interview was conducted from 13 November to 19 December 2012.

Quiring, L, werbeliebe e.V, interview, 2013. Mr. Lukas Quiring is the current President of werbeliebe e.V., and answered my questions from 27 November 2012 to 17 January 2013.

Nguyen, B, PSD, interview, 2013. Ms. Brenda Nguyen is currently one of two Managers of PSD, with whom I was in touch from 27 December 2012 to 16 January 2013.

Yaw, Q, CREATIVe, interview, 2012. Ms. Queenie Yaw Quee Peng, the agency's Advisor since 2006, was interviewed on 22 December 2012 through Skype.