

Essay runner up**Name:** Emma Leaper**Studying:** Fine Art at the University of the West of England

What does a Fine Art degree really involve?

When I signed up I quietly expected young men with glorious beards reading poetry and painting feverishly into the night. Pierced women with vintage cameras round their necks, discussing the end of post modernism in long vowels.....and all sporting berets.

Instead I was relieved to be surrounded by so many people who felt, like me, that nagging creative drive that overcame the logic of choosing an economics degree. Admittedly a lot of them did have beards and cameras, other clichés were evident- such as paint-spattered clothes, liberal politics, iphones and rampant vegetarianism, and yet the warm atmosphere of mutual excitement, doubt, optimism and determination bonded us all together.

Studying alongside mature students is by far the best way to learn. At University, like nowhere else, age becomes irrelevant, and it's often the adult students who are the most ambitious. I'm currently studying with a retired GP who's thrown himself into art to 'view the world in a different light', he calls us all 'chaps', salutes us in the mornings and frequently uses phrases like 'right oh' and 'jolly good!'. He is also in the studios by 8.00am and shames the teenagers with his stamina.

Like all degree courses there's a fair amount of books, except these all have pictures. And rather than plumbing the depths of 19th century existentialism, I found myself writing analyses of Hipsterism, breast enlargement and the history of the British bulldog. That isn't to say we don't learn academic subject matter, Fine Art students become well acquainted with psychology, philosophy and sociological theory, but rather than studying such things in isolation, we are taught how to apply this in order to critically examine our culture.

Above all I enjoy hearing from guest lecturers who work in 'the industry'. It's so inspiring (and relieving) to meet people who started where you are and not only got a job! But one doing something they actually care about.

I used to think my Fine Art degree would lead to being a) an artist, or b) an art teacher, and this always caused me a lot of angst. I knew I loved art, but I didn't fancy the realities of being an impoverished artiste, nor a room of screaming kids flinging PVA. Fortunately this course has exposed the vast network of projects and professions awaiting someone with the skills gained from a Fine Art degree, and since the UK's creative industries are now worth £71.4 billion per year to the UK economy, the idea of graduating into unemployed destitution is really the nightmare of worried parents.

Along with learning practical skills in things like metal-work, analysis and computer aided design, I'm most surprised by my personal development- making art is incredibly exposing, you offer yourself up to interpretation and often criticism, but this is why it's so important. I've become more self-aware, expressive, confident and, well.....happy.