

GILL BASSETT, PICKARD SCHOOL'S DIRECTOR OF ADMINISTRATION, TALKS ABOUT THE DIPLOMA COURSE AND ANSWERS SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS.

What drawing skills to prospective students need?

None. Our experience has proved that we can teach anyone to draw to the required professional standard – as long as they are willing to practice.

What practical experience do your students obtain?

Plenty! There are four main professional assignments taken during the Diploma course – these are real gardens with real clients. We choose them specifically to give students a wide variety of experience in terms of site, client brief and surveying challenges. Typically, these will include a modest town or village garden, a public space, a large rural garden and a roof garden or small courtyard space. Students present their designs for three of these projects within class; the fourth forms the basis of assessment for the Diploma.

What technical matters can your students expect to cover?

Garden designers must have a good understanding of a range of technical matters and we cover the construction of a range of typical garden features such as walls, water features and garden structures. We teach students how to prepare construction drawings, how to write materials specifications and how to prepare setting out drawings for contractors.

Do your students build up any portfolios?

We encourage our students to work on three portfolios during the year they spend with us, and to develop these further throughout their design careers.

A plant portfolio and a construction portfolio help them to develop and build their knowledge of soft and hard landscaping.

A project portfolio will be built as we work on the real life assignments, which students continue to build to include their own projects.

Do you cover legal issues?

Yes – it is essential that garden designers have a good understanding of relevant laws and an understanding of contracts, and contract law, is also important. I qualified as a solicitor in 1995 and still practice part time so am ideally placed to ensure that the legal content of our course is up to date and that students have an awareness of potential legal issues.

Are your lecturers professionally trained/accredited?

Yes they are. Rob Whitehead, the School's Principal, is a registered member of the Society of Garden Designers and holds a Masters degree in Garden & Landscape Design. He is also an DWP approved business growth coach.

Our lecturers have appropriate qualifications and experience for the aspects of the Diploma course that they teach. We are acutely aware that the fact that someone is an expert in a subject does not necessarily mean they are able to teach it. We have chosen our team accordingly.

How do you teach students to set up and run their own design businesses?

My view is that if we don't teach our students how to set up and run a design business, we are only doing half our job. It is one thing being able to design well – but if you plan to run your own business, you need to have a fundamental understanding of how to go about this. Our design lecturers have all set up their own design businesses from scratch. We have in depth knowledge and experience of running a wide variety of design based businesses and dedicate a part of the Diploma syllabus specifically to running a successful business.

Do you teach a house style?

Absolutely not! We are a design school – we encourage all students to develop their own style. The range of gardens designed by our graduates, many of which feature on this website, illustrates this.

Where is the course's focus - business, arts or horticulture?

Business focused but with an underlying balance between arts and planting design.

What is the success rate of your students in setting up their own businesses?

Extremely high. Our records show that of those students who intend at the outset to set up their own design businesses, 90% do so successfully – a statistic that we work very hard to maintain. People choose to study our Diploma course for a variety of reasons and not everyone plans to set up their own business at the end of it. Some may choose to go and work for a larger design company or landscaping outfit, to branch out into the renovation of historic gardens, or to become more involved in the horticultural side and so may not need to set up their own practice.

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Hand drawing versus CAD?

We believe that to use CAD effectively, students need a thorough understanding of the design process and of issues affecting design – and our experience is that this is best achieved through drawing. There are also aspects of hand drawing that CAD simply cannot replicate - students often struggle to add personality to a drawing using CAD. However, on graduation, a number of our students do choose to stay with us to follow a short CAD course.

What do you teach about marketing?

Teaching students how to market their new business is as important as teaching them to design. It is no good having skills if no one else is aware you have them! We therefore have marketing modules within the course and we have particular expertise in this area.

How do you build students' confidence in presenting design ideas?

We have timetabled peer group reviews for the major project set each term and these sessions are a fundamental part of the Diploma. Their purpose is to ensure that students are given experience of presenting their ideas, and receiving feedback not only from lecturers but from fellow students. Regular design practice is also a feature of the course – students are given a plan and a brief and a short time to sketch a design before presenting it to the class. Students say they find these sessions invaluable and excellent confidence builders.

So, in conclusion, who would you recommend the course to?

Anyone who wishes to practice as a garden designer or work within a related discipline. The course is professional in approach, comprehensive and thoroughly enjoyable. A must!