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ABSTRACT

Little research has been done on Visual Arts degree holders regarding their perspectives and their post-degree job or career outcomes. This study explores the extent to which University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine BA Visual Arts degree graduates veered into fields of work or jobs unrelated to their degree, examines the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and its role on the career choices of graduates and also seeks to determine the graduates' held perceptions on the financial viability of visual arts related fields of work, which may also propel graduates to other unrelated fields of work. This study was carried out by means of distributing questionnaires to retrieve data from BA Visual Arts graduates (academic years 2016-2021) at the UWI. Findings showed that graduates were indeed veering into non-visual arts related fields of work post-graduation and socio-economic reasons were posited accounting for this trend. It also revealed that while the Covid-19 pandemic minimally impacted employment attainability for graduates the quality of jobs available and attained was usually far from what graduates desired. It was also concluded that most graduates perceived that visual arts related fields generally presented low-income earning potential and was generally viewed as financially unattractive fields to enter into post-graduation.

Keywords: Visual Arts, Jobs, Careers, Employment, Mismatching, Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

Rationale

This research paper aims to enhance local academic scholarship on the discrepancies and relationship between the degree acquired by graduates and the job or career fields they subsequently enter. Specifically, this study explores the reasons for this with a direct focus on the University of the West Indies, Bachelors of Arts in Visual Arts (BA Visual Arts) degree graduates in Trinidad. It seeks to prove the hypothesis that BA Visual Arts graduates largely tend to deviate into career fields unrelated to their degree post-graduation. This will be done by investigating the career choices of BA Visual Arts graduates of classes 2016-2021. In doing so, this research would offer insight on potential preconceptions and misconceptions held concerning the local job market for Visual Arts degree graduates and the motivations for choices made by the graduates. By exposing the findings of this research and analysing the data collected, this paper aims to shed light on the decision-making process of graduates when choosing to pursue a Visual Arts degree and their career paths. Ultimately, this study explores untapped data to further enhance documentation in the realm of academia on this fairly specific or niche topic, with intent to potentially influence changes in perceptions of visual arts related careers, the creative job market and emphasize the lack of in-field related career opportunities for Visual Arts degree graduates.

To clearly outline the basis for this paper the following thesis statement was devised: It can be argued that University of the West Indies, BA Visual Arts degree graduates largely enter careers or occupations outside of fields of work related to their degree post-graduation due to socio-economic factors, preconceptions and misconceptions about visual arts related careers and the availability of opportunities in the local creative job market.

Parameters

This academic study involved research that was conducted over the period of one academic year and was set for completion by May 17th, 2022. Within this time the research would have established both primary and secondary sources of data, various data collection methods from primary sources would have been conducted and analysis of the data collected would have been completed. This research primarily examined the preconceptions and beliefs held by graduates and also periodically engaged with the socio-economic factors associated with the topic in question.

For this study, primary research consisted of information directly derived from participants who are graduates of the BA Visual Arts degree programme of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine located in Trinidad and Tobago from the year 2016 to 2021; this sample comprised a total of 24 graduates. Initially, it was planned that primary research would entail the delivering of questionnaires to respondents who were graduates of the BA Visual Arts programme in the years of 2019 and 2020 only, however the decision was made to expand the sample size to also be inclusive of graduates who would have graduated in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2021. This alteration of sample size (regarding timeframe of graduation) was made to reduce the risk of findings being heavily biased or skewed in one direction as a result of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic spanning from 2019 into 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in widespread negative impacts on job markets, employment opportunities and the earning potential of many individuals globally. This would have impacted the job or career options and choices of many graduates who would have graduated during the affected time period in ways uncommon to periods outside of such a scenario. Secondary research within this paper focused on works

published internationally and locally to offer greater depth to this study as data specific to the distinct theme of this study was fairly limited. Throughout the study two major themes were examined; both themes played a specific role in this research and worked in conjunction with the other to effectively contribute to the overall body of research obtained.

They are as follows:

1. The careers and career choices of BA Visual Arts graduates.
2. The perceptions held by graduates regarding visual arts related fields of work, value of a BA Visual Arts degree in the job market and the career opportunities available to them.

Objectives

This study aims to fulfil several objectives:

1. To identify the career paths chosen within the selected demographic of BA Visual Arts degree graduates.
2. To examine possible reasons why BA Visual Arts degree holders divert to jobs or career paths unrelated to the field of study.
3. To identify the general perceptions of graduates as it relates to the attractiveness and viability of visual arts related jobs or professions prior to enrolment in the BA Visual Arts degree programme and post-graduation.

4. To outline and examine the ways in which the Covid-19 Pandemic has influenced job or career choices of BA Visual Arts degree graduates graduating between 2019 and 2021 and their ability to gain employment (particularly within visual arts related fields) in those impacted years.

Methodology

The data collected within this study was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods via the medium of questionnaires. Secondary sources consisted of existing literature and written works such as online journals, published books, articles and information collected from government public-service departments and census repositories. The sample chosen for primary research relied on a focussed sampling approach along with its convenience to assist with the ease and speed of data collection and constituted of an intentionally limited, select group of graduates of the BA Visual Arts degree programme.

Data Collection and Utilization

This study was done to investigate social and economic factors affecting career choice decisions of BA Visual Arts degree programme graduates in Trinidad. A descriptive research design was used where a combination of qualitative and quantitative research types were employed to describe the behaviours of the selected sample population. A descriptive research design focuses on expanding knowledge on a particular issue through a process of data collection. Qualitative methods of data collection were utilized in this study to explore the

experiences and perspectives of the sample group with regards to their career choices and career goals. This was an attempt to understand how and why they choose their respective careers, offer insight into the thought process behind their choice to pursue a Visual Arts degree and to obtain data that provided a comprehensive outlook on other aspects of the topic of inquiry.

In this instance, questionnaires were specifically used to gather and explore the views, experiences, motivations and held beliefs of individual participants. Questionnaires comprised of pertinent questions which aided in defining the major themes to be explored and also allowed for a more focussed, targeted pursuit of specific information by the researcher. This method of data collection was utilised for its scalability as it allowed for the gathering of information from a large audience and for its ability to be executed within a relatively short timeframe. The aim of using this method of data collection was to obtain first-hand information from BA Visual Arts degree programme graduates on their career choices and the problems and challenges they faced when seeking employment or career opportunities with their acquired degree amongst other things.

Quantitative research methods were also used to obtain data and this particular method of data collection was essential in obtaining numerical data that would be used to explain particular phenomenon discovered through research. This took the form of questionnaires distributed to one hundred and forty-four (144) BA Visual Arts degree programme graduates. Ultimately, questionnaires were utilised qualitatively in the study as well as quantitatively. Quantitative research involves gathering quantifiable data while qualitative methods are typically exploratory in nature and seeks to answer questions about why things are the way they are.

Questionnaires were utilised to quantitatively gather information on the following:

1. The number of graduates employed in visual arts related fields of work.
2. The number of graduates employed in non-visual arts related fields of work.

The review of pre-existing research to corroborate, supplement and then extrapolate on the research of this paper was employed as part of secondary research and utilised existing literature and written works such as online journals, published books, articles and information collected from government public-service departments and census repositories. The information gathered from these sources were generally reliable and valid. Data of relevance to this study was mainly acquired from written works published internationally. Information derived from these external secondary data sources that supported this research was also integrated into this study where applicable due to a limited presence of locally available data as there is still a lack of obtainable research exploring the specific theme of this research paper.

Secondary sources were useful in gaining insight on the topic of career choices as it relates to degree acquisition, creative fields of work and the quality of work obtained by graduates and were used to form correlations and comparisons to information obtained from primary sources; the intent being to make valid, reliable inferences from the data collected. Utilisation of secondary sources was also valuable because of ease of access to said data and thus it served as a time and cost-efficient source of research. In terms of disadvantages, using secondary data came with the potential risk of data being outdated and not being specific enough to fully meet the researcher's needs. By combining findings collected from both primary and secondary sources this research paper then sought to evaluate the factors affecting the career choices of BA Visual Arts degree graduates with intent to evaluate the correlations between degree acquired and careers chosen and also to outline misconceptions held on the access to and viability of careers in visual arts related fields of work for BA Visual Arts graduates.

Chapter Outline

This study comprises three main chapters. The entry to this study begins with the literature review or conceptual framework of the research where a more generalized overview of the correlation between degree attained and career or field of work entered into by degree holders is explored, this is done by reviewing written works, literature and statistical data. The literature review is then followed by Chapter One. Chapter One presents data and outlines factors as to why degree holders end up in jobs or careers unrelated to their field of study or degree attained, and also makes a comparative analysis of information derived from both primary and secondary sources of information to assess whether graduates largely entering careers unrelated to their degree is a phenomenon unique to BA Visual Arts degree holders, or if this phenomenon is similarly reflected amongst other degree-holder demographics (such as graduates with degrees in Business, Science, Technology, Mathematics or Engineering, etc.). Chapter Two delves into the perceptions of graduates on the general “attractiveness” of visual arts related fields of work and the creative job market both prior to enrolment in the degree programme and post-graduation and examines how these held perceptions influenced their career choices. Chapter Three examines the career choices of graduates who graduated within the period affected by the Covid-19 pandemic i.e. post-2019 and also examines the circumstances they would have faced.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Before entering into the bulk of this paper's research readers will be supplied with definitions to clarify the key terms that will be seen repeatedly within this document. It is important to properly define the terminology used within this paper to ensure readers have an understanding of what is being presented. In examining the theme of jobs and careers it is necessary to understand what differentiates a career from a job although the two are intertwined and sometimes used interchangeably.

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary a career (as it relates to the context of this research paper) can be defined as a profession for which one trains and which is undertaken as a permanent calling e.g., a career in medicine” or a field for or pursuit of consecutive progressive achievement especially in public, professional, or business life e.g., Washington's career as a soldier.

Alternatively, a job is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as a regular remunerative position e.g., she got a part-time job as a waiter.

MyMnCareers, a website developed to help low-literacy job seekers and English language learners find career planning and work preparation information states that a job can be just going to work to earn a paycheck while a career means that each of your jobs, experiences, and training programs is helping you advance in pay or responsibility.

In a comprehensive study done by Eva A. Thaller in 1994 entitled “Career Perceptions of College Art Students: A Qualitative Case Study”, a case study was done to investigate “how

students majoring in Studio Art perceived their undergraduate educational experiences and what connections they saw between their matriculation and plans for the future” (Thaller 1).

Thaller took note that very little research had been done about college Art students and since there had been little research on college students annually completing bachelor's degrees in Studio Art, there was a need for the study to fill that academic void (2). Her work served as both a fundamental source of literary information and a unique examination of the perceptions of Visual Art graduates and their career prospects, albeit Thaller's work was specific to the demographic of Studio Art graduates in the United States of America and not BA Visual Arts graduates in Trinidad. This makes the core analysis and expositions within her work inherently less relevant or applicable to Visual Arts graduates within Trinidad as the job markets, economies, core demographics and social environments of both countries differ.

In a similar occurrence, relevant data and studies related to the study of Visual Arts degree graduates in Trinidad was also found wanting and this points to the general lack of inquiry and interest into the specified demographic and their occupational outcomes post degree acquisition. So while Thaller's research adequately covered major points relevant to the underpinnings of this research paper and aimed to cover similar bases, her work's findings and her insights may not accurately translate to the specific context of BA Visual Arts degree graduates in Trinidad and may also be deemed outdated as it was published in 1994 where job markets, educational standards, etc. would have been different given advancements in technology and other infrastructure over the years; hence the reason for the production of this research paper.

In Trinidad, and also globally, there still exists a general societal perception that fulltime visual artists, pursuers of Visual Arts degrees, and workers within visual arts related fields will

most likely struggle financially through life (Todd). Usually artists are assumed to having to resort to menial, low level jobs for income, hence pursuing a career as a full-time visual artist or a career in a visual arts related field may generally be perceived as a less lucrative, less attractive prospect and could effectively dissuade many from pursuing fulltime art careers or jobs. It can also be inferred that these societal perceptions may negatively affect or influence a visual arts graduate's perceptions of the job or career opportunities available to them and their earning potential by fostering a mindset of low-expectations. This then creates a situation where students graduate from their degree programme with low drive and ambition when it comes to pursuing their art career goals and may lead them to other unrelated fields of work.

A significant revelation from Thaller's work that supports this assertion was that for the first few years after graduation less than half (41%) of Studio Art graduates surveyed expected their income to be substantially less than poverty level and less than thirty-two percent (32%) envisioned that their income would be significantly above poverty level (11). "Accordingly, after all the expense and time the respondents had invested in their education, many of them were expecting to have a very difficult time after graduation" (Thaller 18).

From Thaller's research she states that "Traditionally, college Art graduates have typically had trouble finding good jobs", citing one study that showed that less than half of the Studio Arts graduates employed a few years after graduation ended up working at jobs that even required a degree to support the claim (21).

In seeking career success as Visual Arts degree graduates, in the job market it would also seem to auger well that Visual Arts degree graduates intent on pursuing Art as a fulltime career and being successful in their endeavour would require more than just the basic or fundamental artistic skills learnt through their formal education in a Visual Arts degree programme and may

require an increased level of career guidance. This is what is implied by Thaller through her research; that a more well-rounded or holistic education along with career guidance would achieve greater outcomes for Visual Arts graduates in their career pursuits.

In her paper the notion of needing more than just artistic skills or knowledge for career success was emphasized as the research examined and utilised to reinforce her work revealed that there was in fact a need for studio artists to have good business and marketing skills in order to be financially successful as artists and also inferred that becoming successful as an artist may have less to do with actual artistic talent than previously thought (Thaller 20). In the paper it was revealed that most graduates had indicated that they needed assistance with learning business and marketing skills when surveyed which tends to support the view that graduates were not being adequately equipped with the knowledge required to start successful careers as artists simply via their core degree programme education.

The viewpoint was asserted that whilst in college, Studio Art students needed more career based counselling and career information than what was already being received, it was also posited that professional schools of Art may recognize the financial and career needs of graduates since they offer facilities and resources for career counselling and placement assistance while few state universities had established Art career advising centers (qtd. in Thaller 21). This claim can be disputed however as sufficient evidence for the claim of specialized schools of Art offering the facilities and resources required for career counselling and placement assistance was not supplied for validation or comparison.

A significant aspect of the investigation into the jobs and careers of Visual Arts degree graduates points to the diversion of graduates away from jobs and careers within their field of study, i.e. Visual Arts, post degree acquisition. The Washington Post article “Only 27 percent of

college grads have a job related to their major” offered an analysis of data produced by a U.S Census Bureau report which showed that a minority of college graduates held jobs closely related to their degree majored in and also showed that a large number of graduates appeared to be underemployed (Plumer). Although specifically based on undergraduate degree research conducted in America, this phenomenon of graduates not entering jobs or fields related to their major could also potentially be reflected within the local job market in Trinidad however the relevant data collection and research has yet to be conducted to reveal this information. This highlights the need for more relevant, locally based research and study regarding this topic’s theme.

In a separate study conducted on undergraduate graduates within the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Liana Christin Landivar, a sociologist with the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that close to seventy-five percent of people with bachelor’s degrees in STEM disciplines did not hold jobs falling under STEM (qtd. in Robinson). The data ultimately showed that most graduates who dedicated their college years to STEM subjects veered into other fields afterwards (Robinson). Both articles seemed to corroborate the viewpoints of the other and the findings explored within both articles point in a similar direction in terms of end results despite focussing on two different demographics, albeit within the same country.

Similar to Thaller’s academic piece, the insight and information offered within the literary works of both Plumer and Robinson can potentially be viewed as outdated as datasets used to form the basis for the articles were published in 2010 by the U.S. Census Bureau, more than a decade ago.

Ultimately the review of literature regarding the phenomenon of job and degree mismatching amongst a variety of degree holding graduates yielded, without major academic criticisms, that “What you study at university is unlikely to be what you end up doing as a career” (Ho) and in this research paper it seeks to determine whether this occurrence is similarly reflected amongst the UWI, St. Augustine, BA Visual Arts degree programme graduate demographic in Trinidad.

CHAPTER ONE

This chapter focuses on the phenomenon of Visual Arts degree graduates veering into fields unrelated to their degree majored in and aims to satisfy the first two objectives of this paper. To examine this in greater detail graduates were surveyed to acquire the necessary data to determine the extent of degree majored in to current job mismatching.

When investigating the issue of job to degree mismatching two important data points would be required for analysis. First, the graduate would be required to state their current job or career and second the number jobs or occupations held by these graduates that would fall within the classification of being a “visual arts related” field of work had to be determined.

In relation to question 4 (see Appendix), graduates were asked to divulge their current job or last held occupation post BA Visual Arts degree acquisition responses varied significantly with 13 out of 24 graduates determined to have been holding jobs that directly related to their field of degree acquisition i.e., BA Visual Arts. These jobs were: Visual Arts Teacher (five graduates), Graphic Designer (two graduates) and one graduate each in the positions of Visual Arts Teacher’s Aide, Web Designer, Animator, Fine Arts and Design Practitioner/Independent Artist and Digital Content Producer.

The fields of work or jobs that graduates held which were not visual arts related were: Clerical Assistant (two graduates) and one graduate each in the positions of Manager's Administrative Assistant, Self-employed Babysitter, Inventory Auditor, Customer Service Representative, Musician, Processing Officer and Language Teacher. Two graduates remained unemployed after graduation.

As shown in Fig. 1 below, 13 graduates (54%) entered into or remained in a job or career field that is visual arts related after acquiring their BA Visual Arts degree. However, from the data provided in Fig. 1 it can also be seen that a significant number of all respondents (38%) entered fields of work or career paths unrelated to their degree.

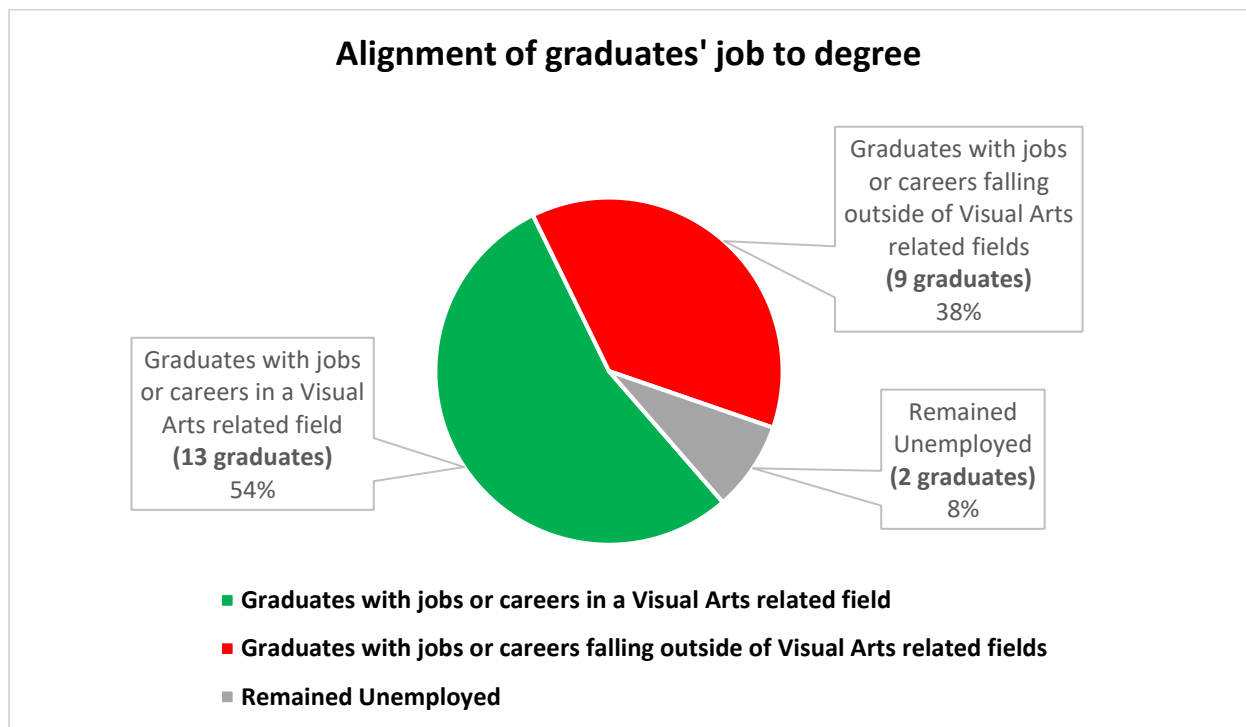


Fig. 1. Chart showing the percentage of graduates entering visual arts related and non-visual arts related fields of work post-graduation.

From the Washington Post article “Only 27 percent of college grads have a job related to their major” an analysis of the data produced from a 2010 U.S. Census Bureau jobs report, researchers estimated only 27% of college graduates with degrees in varying areas of study held jobs closely related to their degree majored in (Plumer).

In a separate article entitled “Most with College Stem Degrees Go to Work in Other Fields, Survey Finds” which focussed on a study conducted on undergraduate graduates within the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), nearly 75% of people with bachelor’s degrees in STEM disciplines did not hold jobs falling under STEM occupations with about half of those who have degrees related to STEM getting a STEM job, this stated by Liana Christin Landivar, a sociologist with the U.S. Census Bureau (qtd. in Robinson). The Census Bureau data ultimately showed that most graduates who dedicated their college years to STEM subjects veered into other fields afterwards (Robinson). Analysis of both articles seemed to corroborate the viewpoints of the other and the findings explored within both articles trend in a similar direction regarding end results, this is in spite of their focus on two separate and differing demographics, albeit within the same country.

When compared to the aforementioned data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau cited in both studies, data attained from the questionnaires answered by the University of the West Indies, BA Visual Arts graduates would suggest that Visual Arts degree graduates followed a similar trend but entered fields of work closely related to their degree majored in at a much higher rate. It must be noted however that the U.S. Census Bureau data covered a much larger sample size and demographic of graduates in both studies and encompassed graduates with degrees in a variety of study areas (i.e. graduates with degrees in Engineering, Biology, Education, etc.) whereas the sample of graduates chosen for this research focused on a limited sample of University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, BA Visual Arts graduates. As a result, because of these differences the comparison of the datasets mentioned may not necessarily offer accurate enough conclusions regarding the phenomenon of job to degree mismatching amongst BA Visual Arts graduates.

An important point emphasized in the work of Thaller on conducted studies of Studio Art students and artists is that in the beginning of their careers as professional artists they must have some type of employment other than relying on their artwork in order to survive financially regardless of how much they may desire to work solely on their artistic endeavours. It is then stated that graduates will often undertake and support themselves with a series of low level or low-paying, unskilled jobs in order to earn a living as a result (Thaller 20).

The claim suggests that a significant reason as to why newly graduated Art students initially divert to unrelated fields of work and/or enter low income, low level, or unskilled jobs is inherently rooted to the need to survive and the need for financial stability or security as they cannot adequately sustain themselves from the sale of their artwork or art-related services alone.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by Adele Todd who is a practicing Visual Artist, senior Adjunct Visual Arts Lecturer at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine since 2008 and a Visual Arts educator since 1997. She opined that pressures from family on graduates exists and it represents a major contributing factor to the phenomenon of graduates entering fields unrelated to their degree. Todd explains:

There are many students whose parents have sacrificed financially to get them where they are, those students then come out of school and their parents want them to find work right away. As such, they get into the first job they can find and although they may have a degree in a specific area of study they have to make money so they may end up working in a bank, etc., to meet various financial needs and expectations.

These points posited by both Thaller and Todd offer very plausible rationales as to why graduates may not pursue or enter visual arts related careers or careers as independent (self-

employed) visual artists post-graduation. Their views also served to offer an explanation as to why the majority of BA Visual Arts graduates generally chose to enter jobs or careers that they perceive as being more financially attractive, readily available or just generally more “stable” options.

CHAPTER TWO

To fulfil the third objective of this paper and examine whether visual arts related jobs or professions were viewed as an attractive prospect for BA Visual Arts graduates, several questions were posed to respondents to determine their views on this particular subject.

In reference to question 9 (see Appendix), when graduates were asked ‘Did you have the pre-conception that creative arts professions falling under the banner of Visual Arts generally offered medium to high income-earning potential prior to pursuing your BA Visual Arts degree?’ graduates mainly responded negatively, with 16 of 24 graduates (67%) responding “No” and only 8 of 24 graduates (33%) responding “Yes”. This data is reflected in Fig. 2 below. The collective data would seem to indicate that graduates were largely uncertain about the viability of earning moderate to high income from visual arts related professions before even pursuing their degree. In essence, this data offers insight into the financial expectations and financial reality graduates may have already prepared themselves for prior to even pursuing their degree.

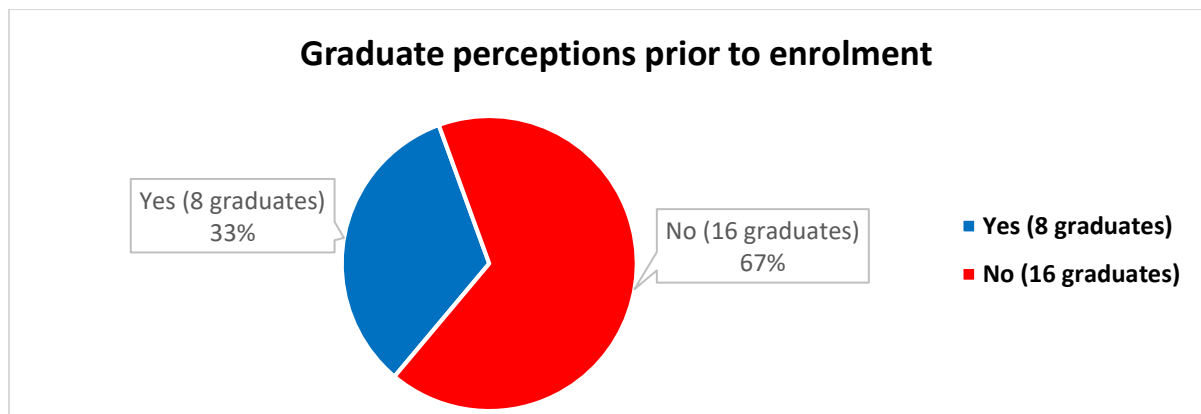


Fig. 2. Chart showing whether BA Visual Arts degree graduates believed that the creative job market or creative arts professions offered medium to high income-earning potential prior to pursuing their degree.

As a follow-up to question 9, graduates were then asked “Has your prior conceptions of the income-earning potential of creative arts professions falling under the banner of Visual Arts changed since graduating?” In response to this question 15 out of 16 graduates that responded “No” to the previous question held the same perception post-graduation while 1 graduate’s opinion shifted in the other direction into believing that income earning potential was actually higher than previously thought after graduating. Of the 8 graduates that answered “Yes” to question 9 prior, only 4 graduates went from believing income earning potential was moderate to high prior to pursuing their BA Visual Arts degree to now believing income earning potential was actually less than previously thought after graduating. The 4 remaining graduates retained their initial stances on the issue post-graduation.

A closer examination of the data stated indicates that the overall shift in perception over time from entering the degree programme to degree acquisition mainly trends towards graduates either maintaining or later adopting the viewpoint that visual arts related professions are not very financially attractive, from their perspective. This could be as a result of numerous factors, from job market factors, socio-economic factors to lack of insight or ignorance on availability of job or career opportunities in the field, etc. however the 5 graduates that did change their viewpoints post-graduation offered their reasoning for their shift in perception.

With reference to questions 10 and question 11 (see Appendix) the 4 graduates that shifted from believing earning potential was moderate to high into believing that it was lower than previously thought expressed similar sentiments. In response to question 12, which asked what influenced that shift in opinion, these graduates generally cited a lack of job opportunities, lacking pay and lack of respect for the field itself as the reasons for shifting their opinion post-graduation with one graduate drawing directly from their experience in the field offering a bleak

outlook on visual arts related fields of work by stating, “Seeing and understanding the creative industry first hand allowed me to realise that very few actually succeed despite their efforts.”

Alternatively, the 1 graduate that shifted from believing earning potential was subpar to believing earning potential of these fields were higher than previously thought offered a unique perspective. The graduate stated, “It moved from “No” to an affirmative 'Yes' because I got exposed to the art world for what it really is on a global scale and I had local examples of financially successful people in the field in my UWI lecturers and other artists we were introduced to during the programme.”

Collectively, the data presented pertaining to graduates’ perceptions both before enrolment and post-graduation on their financial prospects would seem to reflect the findings in Thaller’s work which showed that for the first few years after graduation forty-one percent of Studio Art graduates surveyed expected their income to be much less than poverty level and less than thirty-two percent thought their income would be significantly above poverty level (11). Ultimately, “many of them were expecting to have a very difficult time after graduation” (18).

When graduates were asked if they believed the pool of job or career options available to Visual Arts degree holders in Trinidad was limited, 18 of 24 graduates (75%) responded “Yes” while the remaining 6 respondents (25%) answered “No”. In reference to question 14 (see Appendix), graduates were then asked if they thought a Visual Arts Degree is valued in the local job market and as depicted in Fig. 3 below, 3 out of the 24 graduates (12%) responded “Yes”, 12 of 24 graduates (50%) responded “No” and 9 graduates (38%) responded “Somewhat”.

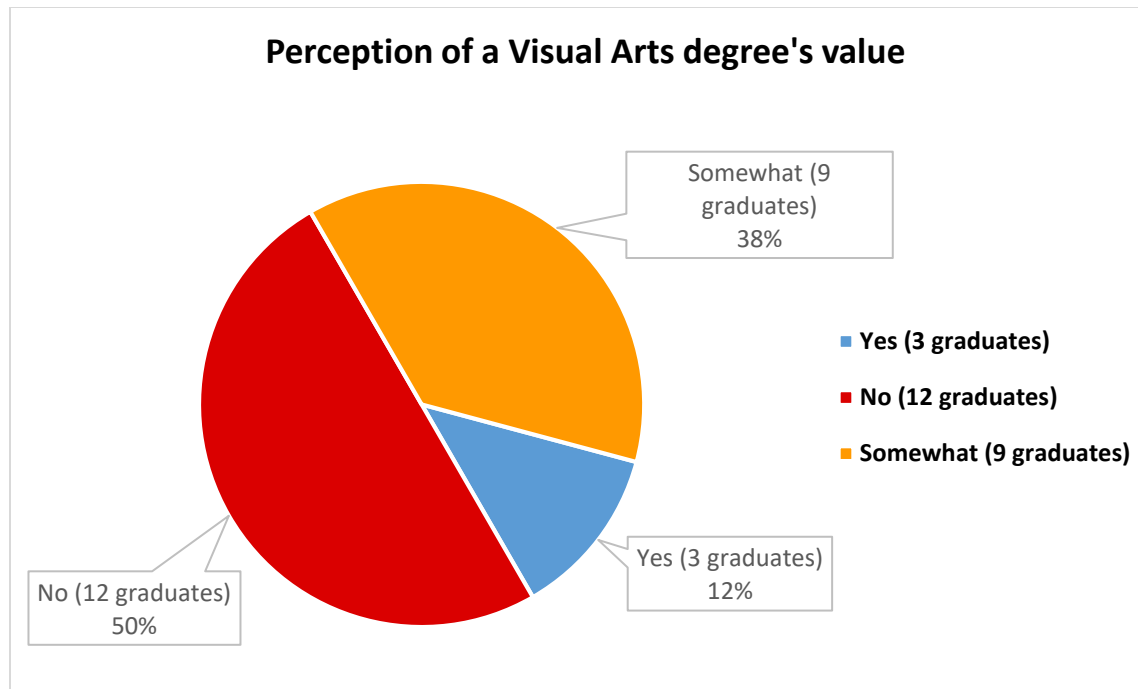


Fig. 3. Pie chart showing graduates' views on the value of a Visual Arts degree in the local job market.

When asked to divulge the reasons behind their answers in question 15 (see Appendix), amongst the pool of responses most graduates which had answered “No” to question 14 expressed similar viewpoints. Many suggested that while visual arts degrees can be an asset, they just aren’t generally respected or sought after as based on their observations and experiences even employers in creative fields typically consider tangible demonstrations of one’s competency (e.g. a portfolio of work) of much greater significance when hiring.

One graduate summed up the overall sentiment by stating “You rarely ever see jobs asking for a visual arts degree, most art related jobs would ask that you have the skill of what they’re looking for but rarely ever need you to have that degree” while another graduate stated that “Employers care about degrees but not specifically in visual arts. They care more about your portfolio than having a piece of paper when it comes to the creative arts.” From these statements,

it would seem that both graduates held the opinion that a BA Visual Arts degree essentially offers limited usefulness within the job market as they believe practical competency or actual skill outweighs certification when seeking employment in visual arts related fields of work.

The three graduates that responded “Yes” to question 14 however, had completely contrasting viewpoints regarding the degree’s value in the local job market when compared to their counterparts that answered “No” to the question. To emphasize the disparity in opinion, two of the three graduates that responded “Yes” suggested the degree is valued and sought after to some extent by stating, “Because it is a requirement to teach” and “It is considered a qualification for working in a good amount of associated fields.”

CHAPTER THREE

In regards to the situations and experiences of graduates post the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, 12 out of 24 graduates (50%) responding to the questionnaire graduated in 2019 or later which demarcates the period impacted by Covid-19.

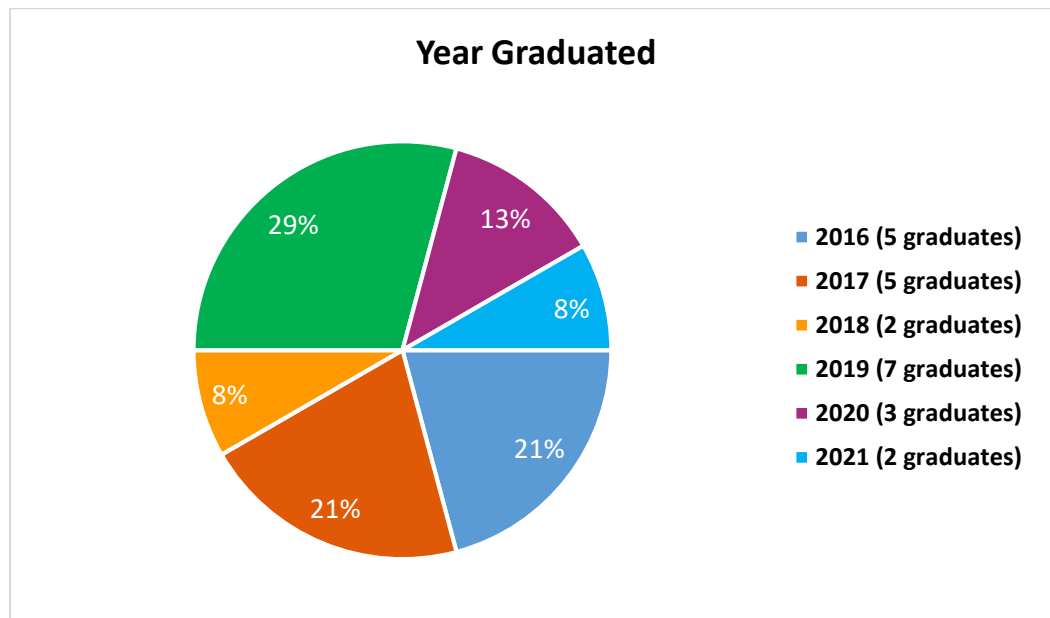


Fig. 4. Pie chart illustrating the breakdown of respondents by year graduated.

With reference to Fig. 4, a total of 12 of 24 respondents (50%) graduated in 2019 or later and similarly 12 of 24 graduates (50%) graduated prior to 2019. A total of 8 of the 12 graduates (67%) that completed their degree in 2019 or later held the status of unemployed prior to completing their degree and only 1 out of those 12 graduates (8%) remained unemployed post degree completion between 2019 and 2022. A significant point to also be noted is that only 6 of the 24 respondents (25%) responded to question 16 of the questionnaire (see Appendix) thought that the Covid-19 pandemic played a major role in the selection process of their current job or occupation, this can be seen in Fig. 5.

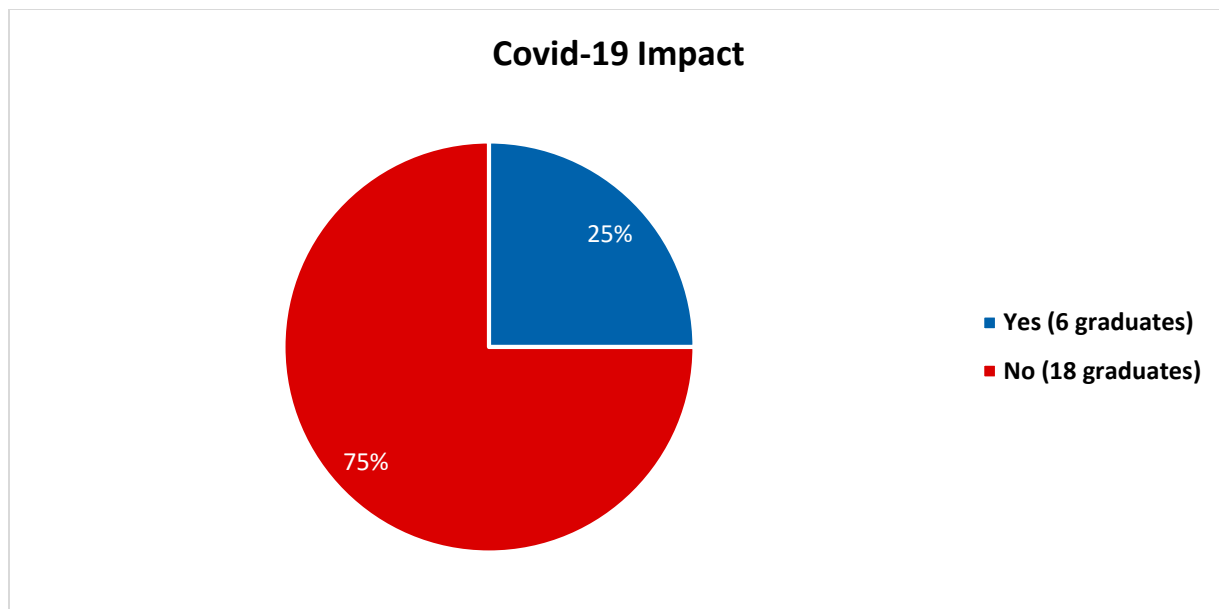


Fig. 5. Chart showing the percentage of graduates that believed the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on their career options and their career choice.

A follow-up question was then posed to the 6 graduates that answered “Yes” to better determine exactly how these graduates thought the pandemic had influenced their selection process in regards to their current job or career choice. When asked of the 6 respondents in question 17 (see Appendix) to explain how the pandemic affected their decision-making regarding their job and career choices several unique answers were given. However, the core issue revealed by most responses revolved around the general belief that the pandemic itself had ultimately resulted in the limited availability of jobs and the access to job opportunities due to various restrictions enforced during that time.

To better illustrate this point, two graduates believed that the pandemic had hindered their job opportunities and/or opportunities to advance their careers and reduced overall job availability. One graduate stated, “Because of the Covid-19 situation I was unable to leave

Trinidad when I wanted to in order to pursue certain dreams, also the Covid-19 pandemic messed with my family's finances and that played a huge part in the way things turned out for me."

Another graduate responded to the question by offering their in-depth perspective on the state of the local job market at the time of the pandemic and their personal experience regarding the hardships they faced finding a job or entering the career path they desired because of it. The graduate stated, "Jobs within my field were non-existent. Most jobs were limited. I spent about a year doing farm labour, as well as doing other yard, handyman and other odd jobs to have money at all. The job I have currently in the bank is a far cry from what I actually want but it actually gets me paid and allows me to even smile at all."

To offer insight on the impact the pandemic had on the labour market and corroborate the statements made by both respondents, the unemployment rate in Trinidad was expected to increase significantly in 2020 due to COVID-19 related public health restrictions put in place on 30 March 2020, which were meant to contain the COVID-19 virus. Trinidad and Tobago's labour market was negatively impacted with the unemployment rate rising to 4.7% in the first half of 2020 when compared to 4.2% during the same period in 2019. The expectation of an increased unemployment rate was grounded on the basis that labour market adjustments led to retrenchments, temporary layoffs, and reductions in working hours. It was also predicated on the presumption that jobseekers would have left the labour force out of discouragement from the difficulties experienced finding work during that time (Economic Survey Main Factors 6; Economic Survey Labour Dynamics 6).

It should however be noted that contrary to those expectations and despite the circumstances outlined, the overwhelming majority of graduates graduating in 2019 or later generally had limited difficulty finding and securing a job or employment post-graduation with

the one and only respondent that remained unemployed post-graduation citing that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted their ability to obtain employment as “Most job opportunities require vaccination and I refuse to vaccinate.” Evidence for the claim is illustrated in Fig. 6 as all except one graduate completing their degree between 2019 and 2021 was able to find jobs within 5 months of graduating. In reference to question 20 (see Appendix) When asked how long it took to gain employment post-graduation the majority of graduates (50%) were able to find a job within three months of graduating.

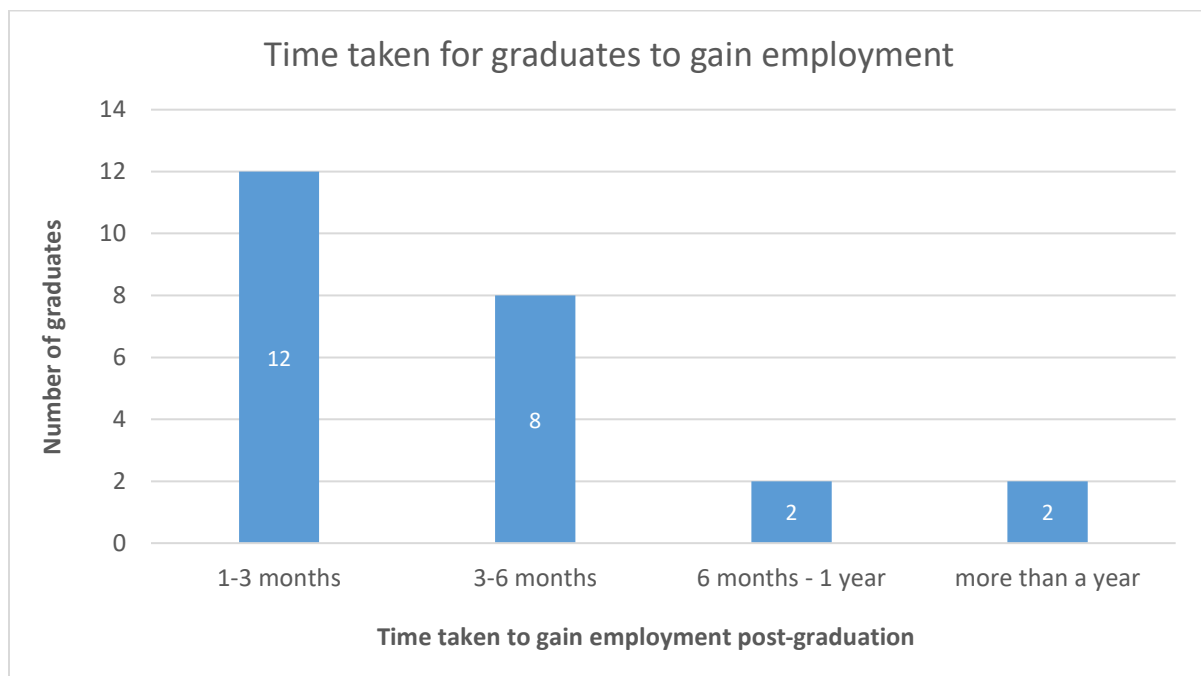


Fig. 6. Bar chart showing the time taken for graduates to gain employment post-graduation.

On face value, while this data seems to indicate that respondents' ability to secure a job during that period was relatively unhindered it is important to note that quality of job attained and job to degree majored in alignment is not accounted for. It does not outline whether these jobs entered into are the jobs or careers candidates truly desired or envisioned themselves entering after getting their degree but that can be answered by the fact that all 12 respondents

answered “No” to question 6 (see Appendix) which states, “Are you currently in the job or career you have always wanted?” with many entering fields entirely unrelated to the field of Visual Arts.

Of those that graduated between 2019 and 2021, 3 out of the 12 were employed in sectors and fields that were unrelated to the field of degree majored in, i.e., Visual Arts. To expand on this statistic and reiterate what those non-visual arts related fields entailed, jobs such as Customer Service Representative, Processing Officer and Babysitter were the jobs given as responses by the 3 respondents. The jobs or occupations listed by the 8 remaining respondents that were visual arts related were Visual Arts Teacher (four graduates), Graphic Designer (two graduates), one graduate working as a Web Designer and one graduate who was both a Visual Arts Teacher’s Aide and Tattoo-Artist.

CONCLUSION

From the data collected and analyses made throughout this paper, several conclusions can be drawn with regards to fulfilling the aims and objectives outlined within this research paper. From this study's findings it was determined that BA Visual Arts graduates did divert to fields of work unrelated to their degree attained in, with 38% or 9 out of all 24 graduates undertaking jobs or careers unrelated to their degree majored in. Findings suggested that while the phenomenon of job to degree mismatching was not as pronounced as that of the data compared from international studies and articles presented in this paper, it is still significant and multiple socio-economic reasons were posited to account for the trend. It can also be concluded that most graduates held the perception that visual arts related fields generally offered low-income earning potential and was generally viewed as relatively unattractive fields to enter from a financial perspective.

With regard to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that while the various restrictions and public health measures enforced during the pandemic resulted in the limited availability of jobs opportunities, most graduates were however able to gain employment albeit not in the jobs they desired and/or in fields unrelated to their degree. So while graduates were able to secure employment with relative ease the quality of job attainable was not their preferred option in the majority of cases.

Despite the presence of internationally available data on the very specific theme being researched in this paper, drawing correlations between data obtained locally from questionnaires and the data compiled from foreign sources presented a less than favourable means of analysis considering the differences in demographic, location, socio-economic and cultural differences

alongside other factors. In essence, the inherent differences between the sample groups examined makes a comparative analysis of both sample groups less credible. This is coupled with the fact that some of the data referenced from international sources and presented within this paper could be considered outdated, with some studies referenced being based on data collected either in or prior to 2010.

With regards to other limiting factors which would have influenced the degree of validity of conclusions drawn from this research, initially a significant sample size of 144 graduates was chosen however only 24 graduates responded to the questionnaire sent out; a mere 25% of all questionnaires delivered to graduates. All questionnaires were delivered to respondents via email but after receiving low response rates various modes of questionnaire delivery were tried in an attempt to garner more responses. This included personally contacting graduates known to the researcher through WhatsApp and also directly messaging all remaining unresponsive graduates through the Facebook platform after searching for their respective individual profiles.

Notwithstanding several repeated attempts to reach out to graduates for their participation and responses through various channels, responses remained low. The volume of responses received could objectively be considered low and it could be posited that a higher volume of responses or data would have given this study greater academic credibility. Another major limitation of this research was the lack of locally relevant available data on the subject matter. When looking for data specifically targeted on university graduates locally, resources were scarce and the absence of this data seemed even more pronounced when isolating the focus demographic down to University of the West Indies, BA Visual Arts degree graduates.

Ultimately research conducted was able to reveal held perceptions and motivating factors of graduates of the University of the West Indies' BA Visual Arts degree programme when

entering the degree programme, leaving the degree programme, the nuances of what influences their career choices after graduation and the influence the Covid-19 pandemic had on those points stated. It would therefore auger well for future graduates of the Visual Arts programme or researchers in general to use this work as a basis for initiating further research and contribute to the limited body of academic research available on the issues outlined in this paper. as it pertains to the experiences and thoughts of BA visual Arts degree graduates since this work was initiated on the basis that much was unknown about the job or career outcomes of BA Visual Arts graduates post-graduation.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

This questionnaire seeks to explore the thoughts, beliefs and experiences of graduates of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Visual Arts degree programme regarding their careers and career choices.

The questionnaire will be used as a source of information to aid in fulfilling the academic requirements of the thesis/research paper necessary for the completion of the researcher's degree.

****NOTE:** Respondents of this questionnaire are assured their personal information will remain confidential.******

1. Sex

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

2. Age

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 21-24
- ☐ 25-30
- ☐ Over 30

3. Year graduated

- ☐ 2016

- ☐ 2017
- ☐ 2018
- ☐ 2019
- ☐ 2020
- ☐ 2021

4. Current occupation or last held occupation post B.A. Visual Arts degree acquisition.

5. What was your occupation prior to obtaining your B.A. Visual Arts degree?

- ☐ Unemployed

☐

6. Are you currently in the job or career you have always wanted?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

7. If "No" to question (6.) please state your preferred career or "dream job".

8. What was the main reason why you chose to pursue a Visual Arts Degree?

Note: Creative arts professions falling under the banner of The Visual Arts include Art Direction, Furniture Design, Fashion Design, Web Design, Graphic Design, Game Design, Film,

Photography, Jewellery Design, Art Curation, Art Education, Fine Arts Painting and Illustration, etc.

9. Did you have the pre-conception that creative arts professions falling under the banner of Visual Arts generally offered medium to high income-earning potential prior to pursuing your BA Visual Arts degree?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Somewhat

10. In reference to question (9.): Has your prior conceptions of the income-earning potential of creative arts professions falling under the banner of Visual Arts changed since graduating?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11. If you answered “Yes” to question (10.) which statement best reflects your current stance?

- ☐ I now believe that income-earning potential was actually higher than previously thought.
- ☐ I now believe that income-earning potential was actually lower than previously thought.

12. If "Yes" to question (10.) what influenced your shift in opinion?

13. Do you believe the pool of job or career options in Trinidad for Visual Arts Degree holders is limited?

- ☐ Yes

- ☐ No
- ☐ Somewhat

14. Do you think a Visual Arts Degree is valued in the local job market?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Somewhat

15. Please state why you chose the selected response for question (14.).

16. Did the Covid-19 Pandemic play a major role in the selection process of your current choice of career or occupation?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

17. If “Yes” to question (16.) please explain in what way did it influenced your decision.

18. If you are currently unemployed, do you think the Covid-19 pandemic is directly impacting your potential employment opportunities?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

19. If “Yes” to question (18.) in what way do you think the Covid-19 Pandemic is impacting your potential employment opportunities?

20. Roughly how long did it take you to gain employment post-graduation? If you were self-employed or started your own business soon after graduating and it was your primary means of income you may state the amount of time it took to establish your business instead.