

Our art educator manifesto

Opposite

Postcards made by art educators attending The Fitzwilliam Museum's and NSEAD's Drawing Voices manifesto talk and workshop
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Michele Gregson, general secretary of NSEAD, explains the power of the manifesto for art education and the importance of our collective hopes, aims and actions

'There is no shortage of statements, arguments or creative campaigns that argue for change but, even so, in the face of arts-hostile policies, we must hold the line and call for change and action'

Being an art educator in the UK today means you are teaching a marginalised subject. Art in schools is undervalued and has been subject to year-on-year underfunding, while performance and assessment measures leave little space for our subject in a crowded curriculum. For many schools, this has led to a reductive curriculum that shows little understanding of the potential and importance of our subject.

Contrast this with NSEAD's passionate and expert community, united as we are in a shared belief that we can make the world better. NSEAD patron Bob and Roberta Smith OBE sums it up brilliantly: 'Art makes children powerful'. Along with you, our members, our patrons and partners,

we work to support the conditions and systems to make this happen for *all* children.

We have been working in this way for a long time; since 1888, in fact, when a group of art school

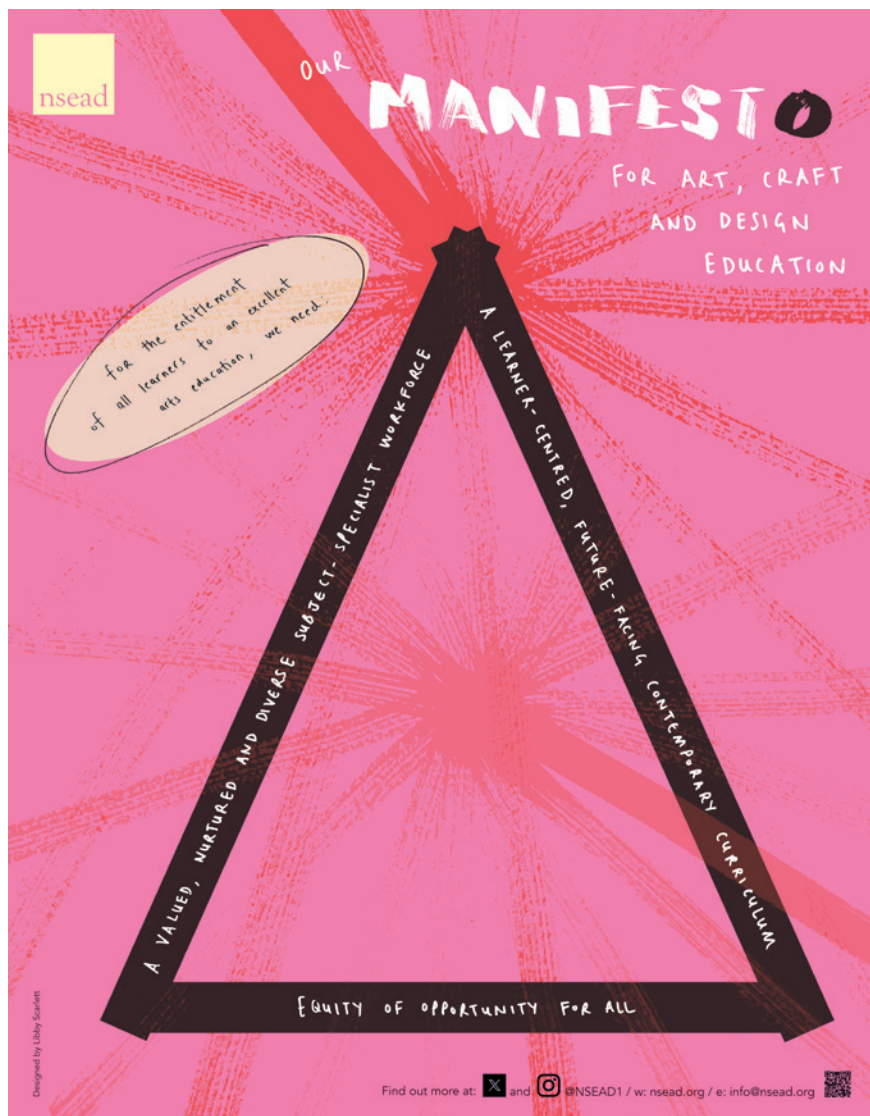
principals gathered outside the Royal College of Art. They were the founding members of NSEAD, united by a shared purpose to promote and raise the value of our subject. They wanted to ensure all learners have access to high-quality art education and to protect the interests of all those

who engage in it. And we still have the same essential founding principles and mission today.

As a trade union standing up for art educators in the workplace, as a learned society, and as a subject association leading research and better practice, NSEAD members work tirelessly to deliver that mission. We draw enormous strength from this tripartite identity, each part of which feeds the whole. It's therefore appropriate that our manifesto poster in this issue features a triangle, a shape that not only represents our organisation, but also the notions of strength, unity and change.

It is also important to remember that NSEAD is a democratic organisation. We have an elected council, a president and a leadership who steer every aspect of our work. So, every NSEAD manifesto is written by the membership for the membership – a powerful collaboration of educators from across the UK, all sectors and phases.

To build our 2024 manifesto, we first evidenced the impact of policies on art, craft and design education. Last year, creative arts entries dropped drastically with A level performing arts down by 19 per cent over 13 years. Our subject has fared better, but we have still seen a decline. In 2023, in England, Northern Ireland and Wales combined, there was a four per cent decline in GCSE and a three per cent decline in A level art and design candidates.



Above
The NSEAD manifesto poster, 2024

In primary and secondary schools, we've seen inequities of provision too, with the evidence in plain sight. Speaking in 2020 at the launch of Ofsted's annual report, former chief HMI Amanda Spielman said: 'We've seen schools that are cutting back drastically on children's opportunities to discover the joys of languages, art, music, drama and humanities – so that most children have to give them up at age 12 or 13... Poorer children shouldn't get a worse choice.'

We have also seen the impact of policies on our workforce. In the *Art Now Inquiry* report (2023), published by The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Art, Craft and Design in Education, we learned that workloads for teachers have increased in the last five years: 'A very large majority of art and design teachers (86 per cent) report their workload has increased.' The same question was asked in the previous *NSEAD Art and Design Survey Report 2016*, where 79 per cent said their workload had increased.

We also know that our subject is facing a teacher recruitment and retention crisis. Again, in the *Art Now Inquiry* report, 67 per cent said they had considered leaving the profession. In 2016, according to NSEAD's survey report, fewer art and design teachers (55 per cent) had considered leaving the profession.

'Our manifesto upholds the entitlement for every learner to access arts, design, creativity and cultural education'

These concerning trends evidence the impact of policies. There is no shortage of statements, arguments or creative campaigns that argue for change but, even so, in the face of arts-hostile policies, we must hold the line and call for change and action. Our manifesto addresses the needs, the vision and the actions required.

At its most simple, a manifesto is a written statement outlining what a person or group stands for, their core beliefs and how they plan to affect change. All our NSEAD manifestos are grounded in social justice values. They set out the work that we can all undertake and the work that is needed by policy makers and governments. We don't affect change just by declaring it is necessary; we must make it happen through action.

Let's go back to the etymology of the word 'manifesto', which derives from the Latin terms 'manifestus' and 'manifestum', both of which mean 'obvious'. To NSEAD members, it is blindingly obvious that art education is essential. But here is the truth: The value of our subject is also not obvious to this government. They do not get it and, for 14 years, they have chosen not to. Our manifesto sets out clearly and directly what change is needed, and why and how we are going to make it happen.

Our manifesto upholds the entitlement for every learner to access arts, design, creativity and cultural education. We set out a clear statement of what our art educator community needs to secure that entitlement for every learner, and how we can work together to achieve that shared vision. And so, for the entitlement of all learners to an excellent art, craft and design education, our manifesto has three key overarching asks or hopes. These are:

- Equity of opportunity for all
- A learner-centred, future-facing contemporary curriculum
- A valued, nurtured and diverse subject-specialist workforce

As illustrated in our fantastic manifesto poster, these key aims create a triangle of change and hope. Each aligns with NSEAD's values and with our trade union, learned society and subject association aims – to protect, support and inspire all art educators and learners.

Each hope is followed by four actions – 12 in total (see our manifesto in the centre-spread, pages 16-17). These are the actions for all policy makers – locally and nationally – in our schools,

colleges and universities, as well as in our government. They are actions by all those who have the power to help – parents and carers, art educators, headteachers, governors, researchers, funders, business leaders, and ministers and shadow ministers alike. We believe these actions will help manifest our hopes. ●