

Why study for a degree in photography?

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Why study for a photography degree? It could be convincingly argued that the technical skills required to make photographs are becoming easier to learn and master. For many people, the sophisticated automatic systems built into today's modern cameras largely dispense with the need to use a camera's manual controls. It appears that being able to produce a technically competent image may have never been easier. With extensive access to many free online resources and tutorials, covering almost every facet of image making, such as lighting, composition and post-production, it is difficult to imagine why there would be any demand for a formal academic qualification in photography. It may therefore be timely to ask what is wanted and expected from studying for a degree. Without doubt, a degree in photography needs to offer a significant alternative to what is already openly available.

It might be useful to begin by briefly examining what role higher education has and what it is supposed to provide. Originally, higher education was the space for activities that were not necessarily market driven. Its attention and focus was the development of human understanding. However, in recent years there has been a change in its overall purpose. This change focused on how graduates will ultimately make a contribution toward general economic prosperity in their future careers. As a consequence, some higher education establishments are principally institutions providing training for future employment, rather places where discovery, intellectual enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake are undertaken. Alongside this change in purpose, with the introduction of tuition fees, there has been another shift of emphasis, in which a transaction – of buyer to seller – is now at the heart of the higher education model, rather than the student. Unfortunately, as the language of the 'market' and of 'usefulness' permeates discussions around university, it will undoubtedly characterise the kind of education that evolves. This may result in altering the essential characteristics of universities, as they

have been formerly understood. Higher education should not be about equipping students to become 'experts,' nor should it be a factory for creating 'specialists' or to find answers to a fixed set of specific problems, such as 'how to take good photographs.' Instead, its focus should be on precisely examining how problems are expressed. It should be the site of free reflection and thinking.

It is difficult then, to imagine how a photography course, based around providing vocational and technical skills can be relevant at degree level. Unfortunately there are many courses structured in this way. It seems what primarily drives this particular model are false promises of usefulness and employment prospects. What is needed is for creative enquiry and understanding to be the core of a photography degree.

Making any form of image is a way of thinking and how we think can be mapped out through photography's own evolution. There can be no question about photography as a significant contemporary practice; it mediates our experiences of the world. It is also, inevitably, a site of ideological struggle. Today, everyone is a photographer and since photography really is everywhere then we have all, in some way, contributed to the changed value of the photograph. Therefore a study of photography should, perhaps, not take as its focus how to make more photographs. Instead, it should investigate the new problems of distribution, reproduction and multiplication and address the very different ways images are used and produced. If this study pays attention to technique, then it should question the types of photographs our technologies force us to take. These topics constitute photography as a subject today.

600 words (excluding title).