

# ON COURSE for success

A range of garden design courses are on offer to those looking to kickstart their career, but careful consideration may be needed to ensure they qualify equipped with the necessary skills

A short course will not suffice, came the message from panellist Helen Elks-Smith at the recent FutureScape event. She was talking about the level of qualification needed to be a garden designer, and it's not the first time it has been up for debate. Last year, in our September issue, we sought to answer the question as to whether a qualification should be required at all.

But if you are going to put yourself through a course and start working as a garden designer, does it matter which one you choose? And is it damaging the industry's reputation to not make a qualification to a certain standard

mandatory in order to call yourself a garden designer?

"If you are offering a service for which you are charging a fee it is incumbent on you to ensure that you have the appropriate skills to deliver the contracted service," says garden designer Elks-Smith, adding that a landscape architect requires "a five-year mixed programme of education and experience" and a garden design degree is three years.

"Those numbers are strong indicators of how much knowledge is needed to begin to offer garden design services as a professional service. Whilst it is possible to accumulate relevant knowledge and skills whilst working in other sectors or studying other subjects at higher education – such as project and people management, financial

and business management, communications, health and safety etc. – subject specialist knowledge is essential."

Elks-Smith says that the working knowledge needed to design a garden and get it built requires "considerable skill and knowledge". There is a long list, she says, including spatial design, design process, construction, graphical communications – "I consider CAD an essential skill" – planting design and horticulture, CDM, contract management, soil management, soil conservation, drainage, tendering and ecology, to name a few.

"If a year-long course only covers one area such as planting design, it is reasonable to expect that planting design might be offered as a professional service, but to

offer a service such as outline design – which is another skill set altogether – is not reasonable.

"If the year covers planting design and spatial design, the skills learnt will simply not be sufficient. Many short courses are fine for amateurs and general interest, and they may ▶



have value as Continuing Professional Development (CPD), but it is not possible to train someone to a professional level in such a way.”

Garden design Andrew Fisher Tomlin, who helped to found and is now a director at the London College of Garden Design (LCGD), says that “short courses do not provide the comprehensive knowledge and training that is required for a modern garden designer,”

adding that “a good indicator of an acceptable course would be those that hold the SGD Educator quality mark.”

The Society of Garden Designers (SGD) awards its ‘Educator Status’ to courses which are a minimum of Level 3 and are committed to high standards. “I am an advocate for professional qualifications, but it should be noted that not all qualifications are the same and so careful consideration should be given,” says SGD co-chair Andrew Duff. “The Society of Garden Designers lists courses which have been awarded Education Status. These courses have been carefully considered and meet the requirements set by the SGD. Clients are much more aware of the differentiation between qualifications nowadays and so an informed choice is essential.

“A Level 3 qualification and above is essential but also there needs to be consideration given to the course length. A two-week course will clearly not give the student the in-depth knowledge required to

practice at a professional level. A course running through an academic year will ensure a deeper level of understanding.”

One of the key aspects to cover, as Elks-Smith listed, is construction. Managing director of design and build business The Garden Company, James Scott, says it is particularly important that designers understand this phase and can design with “build-ability” in mind.

“A good understanding of the construction phase is critical to a successful design project, so while it may not be viewed as essential to a design qualification, I believe it is hugely desirable and beneficial to all parties.

“It’s also very important that newly trained designers understand their contractual liabilities if anything goes wrong during the landscaping phase. A good understanding of CDM regulations and how they apply to the design-and-build process is vital.”

It’s the clients who will suffer if a garden designer does not have the required skillset, warns Elks-Smith. “Far too often the attitude is ‘wing it ‘til you make it’. Far too often unsuspecting clients are used for experimentation and practice. Far too often this results in poor design and poor construction. Far too often this represents a poor spend of someone’s hard earned money.”

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Helen Elks-Smith,  
Garden designer



The industry’s reputation could also be tarnished, and Elks-Smith says it’s not just garden and landscape designers but also those in construction and management who need to have the appropriate skills and expertise.

“Education, work experience, apprenticeship schemes – standards all matter. Standards that are open and might be used by potential clients to differentiate those who have spent their energies investing in themselves and learnt their craft are essential.”

Scott agrees that it is a problem for the industry and its reputation that “virtually anyone” can call themselves a garden designer, distinguishing it from other professions such as architecture and law.



“A ‘garden designer’ may be self-taught or have completed a rudimentary design course that hasn’t equipped them to deliver a full design service. This can make it difficult for prospective clients to work out who is genuinely ‘qualified’ to work on their cherished project – leading to significant risks including overspend/poor value for money, poor quality of work and even safety issues.”

There are potential benefits, then, to making a certain level of qualification essential. It would set an industry standard and establish a baseline of knowledge and skills for all designers to meet, says Scott. “It is likely to reassure clients and prospective clients that the designer is competent and capable of delivering what is needed for a successful outcome.

“Assuming that the qualification is of a suitable standard, it would also ensure that the designer has learnt about the whole process of design and build in sufficient depth and breadth.”

But he says there are arguably downsides to making qualifications compulsory. “It could be off-putting to those that want to work independently from the outset – a mandatory qualification would imply that the trainee/new designer would need to be working for a design practice until they were fully qualified. This might also make designer opportunities harder to access, if you need to join a design practice rather than set up independently. So, making a qualification essential might be somewhat restrictive and drive some genuine talent away from the industry.

Duff says we also “must not forget those who have learnt their trade through time and experience; also, those who have learnt in employment or who have been mentored. For some, experience will always be a better way to learn.”

“Garden design is typically a second career for many and so for those people a qualification that provides comprehensive



training, especially in spatial, construction and planting design, is essential,” says Fisher Tomlin. “But there are many different routes to becoming a garden designer and many of those start with design experience as much as horticultural knowledge. It very much depends on where you are starting from, and for those that don’t follow a traditional route becoming a registered member with the SGD can be another way of showing your professionalism.”

For Scott, accreditation is the best way to ensure garden designers have the required in-depth knowledge, skills and experience. “What matters most is that anyone calling themselves a garden designer is accredited, or actively working towards accreditation. Accreditation with a nationally recognised institution such as the SGD, the [Landscape Institute] or [the British Association of Landscape Industries] demonstrates that an individual meets a particular professional standard. These

standards will include quality working practices and proven skills which members of that professional community have committed to and can demonstrate.”

Duff adds that the Society of Garden Designers’ pathway to membership also ensures the learning continues. “A thorough assessment process over three projects with feedback throughout ensures a continuation of any learning process.”

“The role of professional bodies is incredibly important and their willingness to set and uphold the standards of knowledge needed to provide the service is essential and underpins the professional promotion of our industry to the wider public,” says Elks-Smith.

There are also plenty of CPD courses to enhance and update knowledge and upskill. These should be a requirement, says Elks-Smith.

“There is a lot to learn. We are also in a changing world and climate change means that we need to revisit construction, planting, drainage, and spatial design – all of which ▶

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are impacted by climate change, and we have to update our knowledge and practices pretty quickly.”

Fisher Tomlin agrees that CPD is essential with the development of new working methods and environmental challenges, and so LCGD “offers a wide range of development training”.

“We’re a profession and to remain professional you need to stay up to date.”

But similarly when it comes to embarking on a garden design course, Scott says CPD should be carefully chosen.

“There are clearly many benefits to CPD. In broad terms, by engaging in CPD, we designers ensure that our theoretical and practical learning do not become outdated or obsolete. However, I don’t think we can generalise too much about the content of any CPD activity. For it to be truly effective, the learning needs to be planned and delivered in a way that meets the needs of the business, the customer and the particular role of the individual designer.”

“For example, in my role, staying up to date with design trends and new product technology is essential so that I can properly advise clients on the best materials for their projects. This is a higher priority for me than learning about design software updates – but the latter can be hugely important to a member of my design team.”

“Alongside these role-specific requirements, there are also broad industry trends and changes that affect all designers.”

A clear example of this is all the design considerations arising from climate change. Other related examples could include biodiversity and sustainability.

“Within my own design

practice, the most important benefit that CPD gives us is to help us to be proactive about our learning, rather than passive or reactive, and to be open to learning from each other too.”

With accreditation and CPD, then, undertaking a short course or no course at all might not prove to be an issue. But Fisher



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Garden designer and director,  
London College of Garden Design (LCGD)

Tomlin says that we are “rapidly moving in the direction” of it being mandatory to have an “acceptable” qualification in garden design and “will follow other countries such as the US and Australian states

in requiring a minimum level of knowledge.” He adds: “There are particular areas, especially in construction design, where we need to move towards recognition and that includes landscapers as much as designers.” So, change could be afoot for the route to becoming a garden designer, and it’s one which could arguably change industry perceptions.

