

Preparing University Portfolios

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Guidance for prospective design students on preparing effective portfolios for university admissions from London South Bank University. A well structured portfolio is an important tool for showcasing a student’s creative process, problem-solving abilities, and enthusiasm for design, rather than polished final products.

At LSBU, we interview all applicants to our design courses, and we request that they bring a portfolio with them to the interview. From our perspective, this is a valuable tool by which we can rapidly get an insight into the motivation, aptitude, and skill set of a prospective student; much more so, than simply an A-level grade or prediction. But I’m frequently asked in advance, what is exactly do we mean by a “portfolio”, and what are our admissions tutors looking for in it?

The first point to make, is that whilst it is an important part of the interview, preparing a portfolio should emphatically not be a source of anxiety for students! Honesty is far more important than finesse; the interviewing tutors are fully aware that this is probably the first time these students have had to do this, and that they are only at the start of their career journey; so of course, their portfolio won’t be as polished as employers would expect it to be from graduates.

Graphical Summary

I would describe the Design Portfolio as curated graphical summary of the breadth of their relevant experience to date, and their skills. The word “Design” in the title is emphatically the verb, rather than the noun: we are far more interested in the process, than in the final outcome of any project. From a disciplinary perspective, this is how does the student approach problem solving? Can they think creatively in response to a brief? Can they constructively critique their own ideas? Do they have empathy for users? Are they confident to explore and develop ideas through 2D concept sketches, low-resolution sketch models, proof of principle prototypes, and CAD models? And can they communicate a summary of this process graphically?

Work from other disciplines, like art, graphics, textiles, or coding, is also great to include, and it doesn’t have to be just from formal education to date; evidence of 3D design, creative, or practical activity done outside of school or college demonstrates a deeper passion for the subject.

Has the student built some furniture, designed a poster for a local community event, or done any entrepreneurial activity like selling work on Etsy? Have they participated as a team member or leader in a club or other organisation? This all counts towards a rounded and interesting body of work.

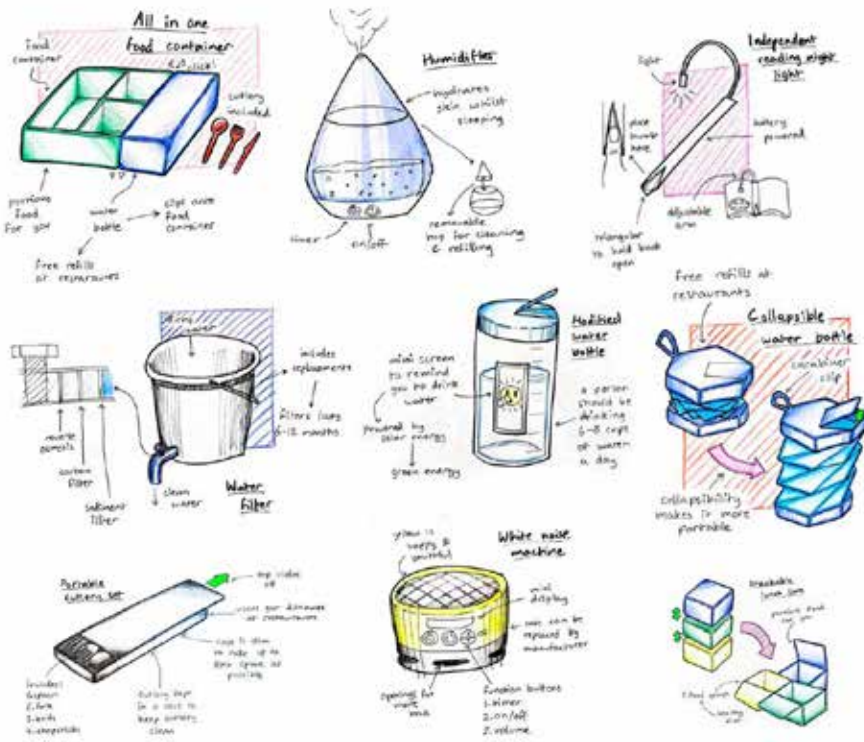
A Picture Says a Thousand Words

We see a lot of “portfolios” that are simply the complete documentation of the major A-level project. Formal educational curricula are quite constrained in scope and the required format. A strong A-level project can have 100+ A3 pages all about one project, often composed of large amounts of handwritten prose text. Not only is there not time for us to read through all this (we will typically have 15-20 minutes to review it during the interview), but also, that only gives us the one project to look at.

Students should rework versions of these A-level project pages specifically for their portfolios, compiling the imagery into collages, and support these with brief, bullet point annotations in the text, designed specifically to signpost key skills. The cliché of “a picture says a thousand words” is well worth remembering here. Following a few simple principles can pay dividends in how easily the information can be understood, and how impactful it can be.



Portfolio by Kelly Oliver from LSBU



Sketches from Portfolio by Johnny Tran from LSBU

Doing the Research

Get students to do some research into other designers or graduate portfolios and use these for inspiration – sites like coroflot.com are very helpful for this. Students could sketch a few examples of different layouts to suit different types of graphic and structure the information students want to deliver, then be consistent with using no more than three or four different layout styles throughout the portfolio.

This enables a viewer to rapidly learn the communication structure and absorb information on the pages. It’s the work itself that we are interested in, not the graphics in the background, so avoiding overly bold background colours is advisable.

Stick to one or two fonts, and keep whichever is used for body text to a simple sans serif, but use two or three sizes to create a visual hierarchy.

Import hand sketches from either photos or scans, and adjust out the contrast on grey backgrounds so the line art is properly integrated to a collage on a white background, rather than a collection of greyish rectangular photos (Powerpoint will do this through the image corrections > brightness/contrast adjustments).

Make sure the images are all high-resolution, not pixellated, and where photos are included (e.g. of prototypes), crop them and align the edges into a consistent grid. And of course, credit any images included which are not the students’ original work.

Physical Portfolio

We prefer to review a physical portfolio to a digital one. A3 is the most effective size for balancing impact and space on the pages, with portability. We recommend a folder that has individual page wallets; this doesn’t need to be an expensive one to protect the contents. This compiles the contents into a series of double-page spreads, so condense each project or topic down to either two, four, or six pages, designed to be viewed as doubles. Add a contents page at the beginning, and label each project with a bullet point introduction summarising the brief (if there was one) or the intention or reasoning for including the project in the portfolio. If they can accompany the portfolio with a shoebox of small prototypes or sketch models that’s great too.

Ultimately what we are looking for, in conjunction with meeting the student themselves, is a rapid sense who they are, and what motivates them to choose to study Design at degree level. Passion is more important than polish; so long as they are committed to learning, we can help them with the rest during the next four years.

We are always happy to offer more advice, and students are very welcome to contact me in advance of the interview if they have any questions: barney.townsend@lsbu.ac.uk

Link



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