# INSIDE THE KILN

## STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF CREATIVE BURNOUT AT UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON

Arts Students' Union

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Creative burnout is a recurring theme in student feedback across University of the Arts London (UAL). While academic stress is widely recognised across higher education, students on creative courses frequently describe a more specific experience: a loss of creative capacity, inspiration, and motivation that directly affects their ability to produce work.**

Despite the prevalence of this issue in student conversations, creative burnout has rarely been examined as a distinct phenomenon within creative higher education.

This report explores how UAL students experience creative burnout, what contributes to it, and what changes could improve the student experience.

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## METHODOLOGY

32 students participated from across UAL colleges and disciplines
Courses represented included Fine Art, Design Management, Fashion, Art and Science, Illustration, and Product Design

**Discussions explored:**

- how students define creative burnout
- what contributes to it
- how it affects creative work and academic performance
- where students go for support
- what changes could improve their experience

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## KEY FINDINGS

### 01 CREATIVE BURNOUT IS EXPERIENCED AS DEPLETION, BLOCKAGE, AND STAGNATION

When burnout occurs, students reported:

- simplifying ideas
- avoiding experimentation
- focusing on completing work rather than exploring it

**This directly affects the quality, ambition, and learning value of creative work.**

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### 02 THE PERSONAL NATURE OF CREATIVE WORK INTENSIFIES BURNOUT

Creative assessment often involves personal expression, identity-based work, and public critique of creative output.

Participants reported that when creative work stalls:

- confidence can drop
- students question their ability as creatives
- critique and feedback can feel personally exposing

**Burnout therefore affects both wellbeing and creative identity.**

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### 03 PRESSURE TO PRODUCE ORIGINALITY ON DEMAND FEEDS BURNOUT

Students repeatedly described pressure to be constantly inventive, continuously productive, and producing new ideas for every project. However, creative processes are non-linear, often requiring time for experimentation and reflection. This mismatch between creative process and academic timelines contributes significantly to burnout.

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### 04 ASSESSMENT DESIGN IS A STRUCTURAL CONTRIBUTOR TO BURNOUT

Across all focus groups, students highlighted problems with:

- deadline clustering
- overlapping projects
- multiple deliverables due simultaneously
- unclear assessment criteria
- switching between written and practical work

**These pressures often force students into “survival mode” working, prioritising submission over creative exploration.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## KEY FINDINGS

### 05 RESOURCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRAINTS ARE PART OF THE BURNOUT PROBLEM

Creative burnout is also shaped by the material conditions of making work. Students highlighted issues with limited studio space, restricted access to workshops and technicians, storage limitations, travel between sites, and the cost of materials.These constraints can limit the scale and ambition of projects and increase pressure.

### 06 STUDENTS WANT INDUSTRY RELEVANCE BUT SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

Some students accepted that creative industries can be fast-paced. However, many challenged the idea that burnout should be normalised as preparation for industry.

Students emphasised that:

- Professional creatives are paid for their work
- Industry projects often involve teams and provided resources

**Participants strongly believe that universities should model sustainable creative practice, not replicate the most exploitative aspects of the sector.**

### 07 STUDENTS OFTEN DEVELOP SYSTEMS FOR COPING WITH CREATIVE BURNOUT ALONE

Students reported some helpful interventions for overcoming creative burnout, including tutor conversations, academic support workshops, peer discussion, creative wellbeing events, and field trips and interim feedback. However, support was often described as inconsistent and dependent on individual tutors or initiatives. **Many students described developing coping strategies for creative burnout alone.**

### 08 FOUNDATION STUDY HELPS STUDENTS MANAGE PRESSURE

Students who completed a Foundation year often felt better prepared for creative study. Foundation was described as offering clearer structure, more contact hours, hands-on skills development, and gradual exposure to independent creative work. This suggests that **transition support is critical in preparing students for degree-level creative practice.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## KEY FINDINGS

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### STUDENTS VALUE CANDOUR FROM INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

Students expressed a strong desire for more open discussion of creative burnout in courses, tutors further acknowledging creative block as part of the process, and industry professionals sharing how they manage burnout.
**These conversations could help normalise creative cycles of stagnation, reflection, and renewal.**

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## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**To address creative burnout structurally, UAL should consider**

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### ASSESSMENT AND COURSE DESIGN

- Review programme-level assessment to reduce deadline clustering
- Better coordinate submissions across modules, in conversation with students
- Allow time for experimentation and iterative development

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### TEACHING AND PEDAGOGY

- Recognise the non-linear nature of creative work
- Support experimentation and reflective practice
- Improve clarity of assessment criteria and timelines in a meaningful way

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### INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES

- Improve access to studios, workshops, technicians, and storage
- Review whether facilities match student demand

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### STUDENT SUPPORT

- Train staff to recognise signs of creative burnout
- Embed structured opportunities for peer exchange and creative recovery

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### INDUSTRY AND CULTURE

- Invite practitioners to discuss sustainable creative practice in an open and honest way
- Encourage more open conversations about burnout in creative work

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### TRANSITION SUPPORT

- Learn from Foundation pedagogy to better support students entering degree-level creative study.

# INTRODUCTION

**This paper explores how University of the Arts London (UAL) students experience and understand creative burnout during their studies. The research was developed in response to repeated student feedback suggesting that burnout is a persistent feature of creative education, but is often treated either as an inevitable part of studying at an arts university or as an individual problem of resilience, time management, or coping.**

The title of this report ***Inside The Kiln*** reflects the relationship between creative practice, pressure, and transformation that students described throughout this research. In many creative disciplines, a kiln is the place where materials are subjected to intense heat in order to transform and stabilise them. Without this process, the work cannot take its final form. However, if the heat becomes too great or poorly controlled, the work can crack, warp, or break entirely. This metaphor captures a central tension within creative education at UAL. Pressure, critique, and challenge are essential parts of developing creative practice, but when the intensity of those pressures exceeds sustainable limits, the creative process itself can begin to fracture. This report reflects the experiences of students working within these conditions, navigating the transformative possibilities of creative education while also confronting the risk of creative burnout.

# INTRODUCTION

While student wellbeing is widely recognised as a priority within higher education, creative burnout as a distinct phenomenon has received relatively little focused attention in course design, assessment design, or institutional support structures. Across the sector, there has been limited systematic exploration of how the specific conditions of creative education may contribute to burnout, or how those conditions might be adapted to support more sustainable creative practice. As a result, the issue is often addressed through general wellbeing frameworks rather than through changes to pedagogy, assessment structures, or the material conditions of creative work.

This research suggests that students do not see creative burnout as identical to general academic stress. Instead, they describe it as something shaped by the specific conditions of creative education, with the necessity to produce original ideas on demand, the personal nature of assessed work, the material and spatial realities of making, unclear or clustered assessment structures, and pressure to prepare for industry without access to industry-level resources.

Throughout this research process, students repeatedly emphasised that creative burnout is not simply about having too much work. Rather, it is experienced as a loss of creative capacity, a process of feeling unable to generate ideas, becoming stuck in projects, losing confidence in one's creative ability, or narrowing work to safer and more strategic outputs simply to meet deadlines. In this sense, creative burnout has implications not only for wellbeing, but also for the quality, ambition, and authenticity of students' work.

This raises important questions about how creative education is structured. Many higher education systems (including those used within arts universities) have historically adopted assessment frameworks derived from more traditional academic disciplines, where knowledge is demonstrated through essays, written examinations, and structured assignments. These models tend to assume relatively linear workflows and clearly bounded outputs. Creative practice, however, often develops through iterative experimentation, reflection, failure, and periods of incubation that do not always align easily with tightly scheduled submission deadlines or multiple simultaneous deliverables.

Students involved in this research repeatedly suggested that the way assessment is currently structured can conflict with how creativity 'actually' develops. When creative work is compressed into overlapping deadlines, when ideation is required under continuous pressure, or when projects lack clear boundaries, students may experience creative stagnation rather than productive experimentation. This suggests that the issue is not only how much work students are asked to do, but how the rhythms of creative work interact with the rhythms of academic assessment.

Understanding these dynamics matters not only for student wellbeing but also for the educational mission of an arts university. If creative burnout leads students to simplify ideas, avoid experimentation, or prioritise strategic completion over meaningful development, it may undermine key aims of creative education. Art schools are supposed to inculcate a culture of risk-taking, originality, critical thinking, and the development of an independent creative practice, yet failing to recognise the need to design around creative burnout risks failing to meet these principles.

For UAL, listening to students' experiences of creative burnout is therefore not simply an exercise in wellbeing monitoring. It is an opportunity to reflect on how pedagogical structures, assessment design, and institutional culture shape the conditions in which creative work is produced. Doing so also aligns with broader sector conversations about sustainable creative practice, student mental health, and the responsibilities of universities preparing students for creative careers. More broadly, this research invites a deeper reflection on what it means for an art school to design learning environments that genuinely support creative development. Arts education has historically positioned itself as a space for experimentation, critique, and innovation, not only in artistic practice, but also in the ways teaching and learning take place. Addressing creative burnout therefore presents an opportunity to think more ambitiously about pedagogy and assessment in art schools, and to consider whether the structures inherited from more traditional models of higher education are always the most conducive to creative learning.

***By foregrounding student perspectives, this report aims to contribute to that conversation and to support the development of creative education that is both ambitious and sustainable.***

# METHODOLOGY

**This paper draws on qualitative data collected through a series of online focus groups conducted in March 2026 with current University of the Arts London (UAL) students. In total, 32 students participated across three focus groups, representing a range of colleges, levels of study, and disciplines, including Fine Art, Art and Science, Design Management, Fashion Styling, and Data Science and Artificial Intelligence. The diversity of courses represented allowed the research to capture perspectives from students working across both traditionally studio-based and more interdisciplinary creative programmes.**

Participants were recruited through Arts Students' Union's Research Insiders programme, a voluntary network of UAL students who have opted in to take part in research related to the student experience. Recruitment through this programme enabled the research to reach students from different colleges and courses while ensuring participants had expressed an interest in contributing to institutional research and student voice initiatives.

Each focus group session was conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately one hour. Sessions were facilitated by the Arts Students' Union Policy and Research team and followed a semi-structured format designed to encourage open discussion while ensuring consistency across groups. All sessions were recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed to support detailed thematic analysis.

# METHODOLOGY

**The discussion guide was structured around six core areas of inquiry:**

01 **HOW STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND RECOGNISE CREATIVE BURNOUT**

02 **THE FACTORS THEY PERCEIVE AS CONTRIBUTING TO IT**

03 **HOW BURNOUT AFFECTS CREATIVE WORK, ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT, AND PERFORMANCE**

04 **WHETHER STUDENTS EXPERIENCE BURNOUT PRIMARILY AS AN INDIVIDUAL ISSUE OR AS SOMETHING SHAPED BY COURSE STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES;**

05 **WHERE STUDENTS CURRENTLY GO FOR SUPPORT WHEN EXPERIENCING BURNOUT**

06 **WHAT CHANGES STUDENTS BELIEVE WOULD MEANINGFULLY REDUCE OR PREVENT CREATIVE BURNOUT**

The focus group format was chosen because it allows participants to respond to each other's experiences and build on shared perspectives. This approach is particularly valuable when exploring topics such as burnout, where students may recognise patterns in one another's experiences and articulate issues collectively that may not emerge as clearly in individual interviews.

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies recurring ideas, patterns, and tensions within discussion data. Through repeated reading of the transcripts, key themes were coded and grouped into broader categories relating to the experience, causes, and consequences of creative burnout, as well as student suggestions for change.

As a qualitative study, this research is not intended to produce statistically representative findings about the entire UAL student population. Instead, its purpose is exploratory, to surface lived experiences, identify recurring patterns across student accounts, and provide insight into how creative burnout is understood and experienced within creative higher education. These insights can help inform future research, institutional policy, and discussions around course design, assessment practices, and student support.

# DEFINING "CREATIVE BURNOUT"

**The concept of burnout has been widely studied in psychology and organisational research, but the specific phenomenon of creative burnout is less clearly defined in academic literature. The most influential framework for understanding burnout comes from the work of Christina Maslach and colleagues, who describe burnout as a psychological syndrome resulting from chronic work-related stress (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). It is typically characterised by three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or detachment, and a reduced sense of effectiveness or accomplishment.**

Although this framework has been applied across professions and educational settings, it does not fully capture the distinctive pressures associated with creative labour. Research on cultural and creative industries has shown that creative work often involves a strong connection between personal identity and professional output. Creative workers are frequently expected to generate original ideas continuously, while also managing uncertain conditions, freelance or project-based structures, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life. Gill and Pratt argue that cultural and creative work is often characterised by precariousness, emotional investment, and self-driven productivity, where workers are expected to continually produce ideas and maintain enthusiasm for their work (Gill & Pratt, 2008). In these contexts, exhaustion is not only a result of workload, but of the ongoing demand to invest personal creativity and identity in work outputs.

In creative education, many of these dynamics appear in modified form. Students are often required not simply to demonstrate knowledge, but to develop original ideas, experiment with forms, and produce work that reflects a developing creative voice.

At the same time, creative work is frequently produced within institutional structures (such as modular assessment systems and fixed submission deadlines) that were historically designed for more traditional academic disciplines. Research on creativity suggests that creative processes are rarely linear. Instead, they often involve cycles of experimentation, incubation, reflection, and revision before ideas take shape (Sawyer, 2012). When creative practice is compressed into tightly scheduled assessment frameworks, the rhythms of creative development may clash with the rhythms of academic evaluation.

Within this report, creative burnout therefore refers to a condition in which students experience not only stress or overwork, but a diminished capacity to engage in creative processes themselves. This can include difficulty generating ideas, feeling creatively blocked, losing motivation to experiment, or producing work primarily to satisfy assessment requirements rather than to explore ideas meaningfully.

# DEFINING "CREATIVE BURNOUT"

Creative burnout differs from general academic stress in several important ways. In many essay-based disciplines, students are asked to respond to defined questions, analyse existing material, or construct arguments within established frameworks. In creative disciplines, by contrast, students are often required to originate ideas, develop personal approaches, and sustain experimentation over extended periods. This means burnout can manifest not simply as fatigue, but as a loss of creative momentum or a sense of being "stuck" within the creative process itself.

For the purposes of this paper, creative burnout is therefore understood as a form of exhaustion specific to creative practice, produced through the interaction between sustained creative labour, emotional investment in work, and the structural conditions of creative education.

These conditions include assessment design, expectations around originality, access to resources and space for making, and the broader cultural norms of creative disciplines. Clarifying this definition allows the report to distinguish creative burnout from more general discussions of student wellbeing.

It also provides a framework for examining how the specific structures and expectations of creative education shape students' experiences of exhaustion experimentation, and creative development.

# FINDINGS

**This section presents the key findings from the focus groups conducted for this research. While individual experiences varied across courses and colleges, participants consistently identified a number of shared themes shaping how creative burnout is experienced within creative education at UAL. Students described creative burnout not simply as the result of heavy workload, but as a disruption to their ability to generate ideas, experiment, and sustain creative practice. In this section, the report outlines the main patterns that emerged from the discussions, highlighting both the personal experiences of creative burnout and the structural conditions that contribute to it, including assessment design, expectations around originality, access to resources, and the emotional dynamics of creative work.**

**The following themes illustrate how students understand and navigate creative burnout within their studies.**

# FINDINGS

## 01 CREATIVE BURNOUT IS EXPERIENCED AS DEPLETION, BLOCKAGE, AND STAGNATION

The strongest shared theme across all focus groups was that students experience creative burnout primarily as a loss of creative capacity, rather than simply as tiredness or workload stress. Participants consistently described moments where they felt unable to generate ideas, move forward with projects, or engage meaningfully with their work. In contrast to more conventional experiences of academic pressure, burnout was repeatedly characterised as feeling stuck within the creative process itself.

Students across disciplines described reaching a point where ideas stop flowing and creative work becomes difficult to begin or sustain. Rather than simply feeling overworked, students described burnout as a state in which they felt mentally exhausted, creatively blocked, and unable to produce work in the way they wanted. In this sense, burnout did not only reduce productivity, but it also disrupted the processes of imagination, exploration, and experimentation that underpin creative practice.

**"For me personally, it's just staring at a blank screen or feeling like you used your entire mental capacity… you're kind of forcing something that's supposed to be personal and that creativity is just not coming because you're under pressure." - *BA Fine Art student, Chelsea College of Arts***

This account highlights a key dimension of creative burnout, the tension between the expectation that creative work should be personal, original, and expressive, and the pressure to produce that work under fixed deadlines. Students described situations where the need to produce work quickly can conflict with the more iterative and reflective nature of creative development. When creativity becomes something that must be produced "on demand," students can experience a sense of cognitive and emotional depletion.

Participants also frequently described burnout as a loss of motivation and inspiration. When creative ideas do not come easily, the resulting frustration can make it harder to begin work at all, producing a cycle in which the difficulty of starting work reinforces the feeling of burnout.

***"I think for me, it kind of looks like a lack of motivation. You know, that you kind of like feel like you're having to do something, but you don't have the ideas to do it. Quite often I get a creative block [where] no inspiration is coming and I don't feel motivated because of it. And it can become like kind of a circular problem really, but also physically tiredness and exhaustion can like be a symptom really of that." - MA Fine Art Digital student, Central Saint Martins***

These experiences suggest that creative burnout is not only an outcome of heavy workloads but is also linked to the cognitive demands of creative ideation itself. Unlike more traditional academic tasks that may involve responding to a set question or analysing existing material, creative work requires the generation of new ideas. When students feel unable to generate those ideas, the result is not simply slower progress but a deeper sense of creative paralysis.

# FINDINGS

## 01 CREATIVE BURNOUT IS EXPERIENCED AS DEPLETION, BLOCKAGE, AND STAGNATION

For many students, creative burnout also manifests as a sense of creative stagnation when they remain with the same project or problem for an extended period of time. Without clear momentum or new ideas, projects can begin to feel exhausting rather than stimulating.

***"Sometimes you stay with one project for too long and you reach a point where you don't have any more thoughts to give." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

This suggests that burnout may emerge not only from workload intensity but also from extended engagement with unresolved creative problems. When students feel unable to move beyond a particular stage of development within a project, the creative process itself can become draining rather than generative.

Several participants described reaching moments where they were simply unable to move forward with a project at all, even when deadlines were approaching.

***"You feel stuck… like you're not able to complete and portray what you really want to." - BSc Psychology of Fashion, London College of Fashion***

In these moments, participants described a gap between the work they hoped to produce and the work they felt capable of producing under conditions of burnout. This gap can contribute to feelings of frustration, self-doubt, and reduced confidence in their creative abilities.

Participants also described how creative burnout can temporarily halt creative practice altogether. In some cases, periods of intense academic work or sustained project pressure left students unable to produce creative work for extended periods.

***"People weren't making at all. I don't think I made any work for like two months after my dissertation because I was so done." - BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins***

This example illustrates how creative burnout can have lasting effects beyond the immediate assessment period. Even after deadlines have passed, students may struggle to regain creative momentum or reconnect with their practice.

Importantly, students emphasised that when burnout occurs, it often changes the way they approach creative work. Instead of exploring ideas, experimenting with materials, or developing ambitious concepts, the focus shifts toward completing the minimum required work for assessment.

***"At [the point of burnout] it's about completing the project and submitting it on time rather than having fun with it, doing any experimentation or being very creative about it." - BA Graphic Design student, Camberwell College of Art***

# FINDINGS

## 01 CREATIVE BURNOUT IS EXPERIENCED AS DEPLETION, BLOCKAGE, AND STAGNATION

Taken together, these accounts suggest that creative burnout represents a specific form of depletion within the creative process itself, where students struggle to access the ideas, curiosity, and energy needed to engage in creative practice.

**This distinction is significant. Creative burnout does not only affect students' wellbeing, it also affects the core educational activities that art and design education seeks to cultivate, including experimentation, risk-taking, and the development of an independent creative practice. When burnout leads students to simplify their work, avoid experimentation, or disengage from their practice entirely, it raises important questions about how creative education is structured and supported.**

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## 02 THE PERSONAL NATURE OF CREATIVE WORK MAKES BURNOUT MORE EMOTIONALLY INTENSE

Students across the focus groups described creative work as emotionally different from more conventional academic tasks, because assessed work at UAL often feels personal, identity-based, and closely tied to self-expression. While all forms of higher education involve evaluation and critique, participants suggested that creative disciplines often require students to invest a greater degree of personal perspective, experience, and identity in their work.

Several students contrasted creative assignments with essay-based work in more traditional academic subjects. Essays were described as tasks where the source material already exists and the student's role is to interpret or assemble it. Creative work, by contrast, requires generating ideas from scratch and developing an original direction, making the process feel more vulnerable and psychologically demanding.

***"An essay feels easier because the work exists already. You're just putting it together. With creative work you're sitting there thinking, what am I going to do?" - BA Illustration student, Camberwell College of Arts***

Students therefore described creative work as requiring them not only to demonstrate knowledge or technical skill, but also to present ideas that feel closely tied to their own perspectives or identities. When they struggled to generate ideas or felt creatively blocked, this difficulty could be experienced not simply as a temporary problem with a project but as something more personal.

***"You're kind of forcing something that's supposed to be personal, and that creativity is just not coming because you're under pressure." - BA Fine Art student, Chelsea College of Arts***

# FINDINGS

## 02 THE PERSONAL NATURE OF CREATIVE WORK MAKES BURNOUT MORE EMOTIONALLY INTENSE

In this context, burnout becomes entangled not only with workload but also with confidence, self-worth, and identity as a creative practitioner. Several students suggested that when they experience creative burnout, they begin to question whether the problem lies with the project itself or with their own creative ability.

***"You lose confidence because you start wondering if it's creative burnout or if you're just not good enough." - BA Fashion PR and Styling student, London College of Fashion***

These experiences also interact with pedagogical practices that are common in art and design education, particularly the use of critiques ("crits") as a method of group feedback.

Crits are widely recognised as a core teaching and feedback method within art schools, designed to encourage discussion, reflection, and peer learning. However, previous research by Arts Students' Union has shown that crits can also be experienced as emotionally exposing or vulnerable spaces, particularly when students are presenting work that is personally meaningful or identity-driven (Sherwood, 2023).

Arts SU's report Crits and Inclusive Learning at UAL notes that crits often involve limited preparation or training for both staff and students, meaning they can feel extremely exposing and vulnerable for participants. The report also documents cases where critiques move away from the work itself and into questioning students' identities, experiences, or personal backgrounds. In one example, a student described crit discussions shifting from feedback on their work to intrusive questioning about their identity and experiences as a queer student.

This dynamic is particularly significant for marginalised students, who may feel pressure to represent or explain aspects of their identity during discussions of their work. The report notes that some students felt they were placed in the position of acting as "ambassadors for their communities" rather than simply presenting creative work.

Although the focus groups for this project did not focus specifically on crit pedagogy, the themes that emerged closely align with these earlier findings. Students repeatedly emphasised that when creative work is tied to personal identity or experience, criticism or rejection can feel more emotionally charged than feedback on a conventional academic task.

Participants also suggested that this emotional investment can affect how they approach creative risk-taking. When work feels like an extension of personal identity, negative feedback can feel more difficult to separate from personal judgement, making experimentation more intimidating, particularly when students are already experiencing creative burnout.

# FINDINGS

## 02 THE PERSONAL NATURE OF CREATIVE WORK MAKES BURNOUT MORE EMOTIONALLY INTENSE

***"When you're stuck, it's not just that the work isn't working. It feels like you're the one who isn't working. I don't know how much more of myself I can share back-to-back."* - BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins**

This emotional dimension of creative work helps explain why burnout in creative disciplines can be experienced as particularly intense. Periods of creative block may not simply be interpreted as a temporary difficulty with a task, but as a challenge to students' sense of themselves as creative individuals.

These findings suggest that the personal and expressive nature of creative learning raises the emotional stakes of assessment and feedback. Burnout is therefore not experienced purely as exhaustion, but as a disruption to students' confidence in their creative voice and identity.

**Recognising this dynamic is important for understanding why creative burnout may manifest differently from more conventional forms of academic stress.** It suggests that institutional responses to burnout in creative education may need to consider not only workload and scheduling but also the emotional and relational dimensions of creative pedagogy, including how critique, feedback, and identity intersect within learning environments.

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## 03 PRESSURE TO PRODUCE ORIGINALITY ON DEMAND INHIBITS CREATIVITY

Across the focus groups, students repeatedly described a sense of pressure to be constantly inventive, original, and productive. Creative work was not only time-consuming; it also required the continual generation of new ideas, often within tightly structured academic timelines. Participants suggested that this expectation to produce originality on demand was one of the most significant contributors to creative burnout.

Students described the expectation that every project should result in something new or distinctive. While originality is often positioned as a central value of creative education, participants suggested that the continuous demand for new ideas can become exhausting when it is combined with overlapping deadlines, critique processes, and the pressure to produce work that will be assessed.

One student described this expectation as an ongoing burden within their course: ***"We do have like that kind of burden... it has to be something new all the time, which might not happen." - MA Graphic Media Design student, London College of Communication***

# FINDINGS

## 03 PRESSURE TO PRODUCE ORIGINALITY ON DEMAND INHIBITS CREATIVITY

This suggests that creative burnout may be linked not only to workload or time pressure, but also to the cognitive and emotional demands of sustained ideation. Unlike tasks that primarily involve responding to defined questions or analysing existing material, creative projects often require students to repeatedly generate original ideas and directions.

When those ideas do not emerge easily, the pressure to produce them can lead to frustration and self-doubt. Another student described how this expectation can become overwhelming when ideas fail to materialise, particularly when projects are assessed and time is limited.

***"It is a lot of pressure because I can't think of anything unique to save my life. And honestly, I'm at the point where I'm thinking, as long as I get the grade." - BA Fashion PR and Communication, London College of Fashion***

This comment highlights one of the key consequences of creative burnout: when the pressure to produce originality becomes too intense, students may shift their focus away from experimentation or creative exploration and instead prioritise simply meeting the minimum requirements for assessment.

At the same time, some students described how reframing the concept of originality could help reduce this pressure. Rather than expecting entirely new ideas, some tutors encouraged students to think about originality as emerging from perspective and interpretation.

***"What they've started like pointing out is that literally everything in the world has already been done… it takes the pressure off because it's your point of view, it's your perspective, and that's the thing that's new about it." - BA Fashion Design: Communication student, Central Saint Martins***

This perspective suggests that the way creativity and originality are framed within teaching can influence how students experience pressure. When originality is presented as something that must constantly be invented, students may feel trapped in a cycle of trying to produce increasingly novel ideas. When it is framed instead as a matter of personal interpretation or perspective, the expectation may feel more achievable.

These accounts suggest that the continuous expectation to produce original ideas can become a significant source of pressure within creative education. While originality remains a central value of art and design practice, the assumption that creativity can be generated consistently and on demand may contribute to the experience of creative burnout, particularly when students are managing multiple projects and deadlines simultaneously.

# FINDINGS

## 04 ASSESSMENT DESIGN IS A STRUCTURAL CAUSE OF CREATIVE BURNOUT

The clearest structural theme across all three focus groups was assessment design. Students repeatedly pointed to deadline clustering, overlapping projects, simultaneous deliverables, unclear criteria, and incompatible modes of work as core contributors to creative burnout.

These concerns suggest that burnout is often produced by how courses structure, sequence, and communicate assessment requirements. When multiple complex outputs are due simultaneously, or when the expectations of different modules compete with one another, students reported that it becomes difficult to sustain meaningful engagement with creative work.

One student described the experience of being required to submit several different forms of assessment on the same day: ***"There are like five or six different things we have to submit in one day and all of them require different formats, different content that goes into it. So you can't focus on one thing and give it your all. Your attention is divided into five different things." - MA Service Design student, London College of Communication***

This example highlights a central issue identified in research on assessment load and student wellbeing. Studies in higher education have consistently shown that when assessment tasks cluster around the same deadline, students are forced to adopt short-term coping strategies such as prioritising completion over depth of engagement (Boud and Falchikov, 2007). In creative disciplines, where projects often require extended experimentation, reflection, and revision, this compression of assessment can be particularly problematic.

Students described similar experiences across multiple courses. In one discussion, a student described the cumulative pressure created when several major components of a course are due within a short period of time.

***"So when you have to do both the dissertation, the paper and the portfolio, and you also want to submit high quality work and develop your practice, you can't deliver your best they all come within one month." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

Another student described how this pattern of overlapping projects affected the quality of their work: ***"With creative burnout coming from second year, I felt like everything I was submitting was very rushed and just project after project after project. There was no quality to it. It was more just kind of trying to submit the bare minimum." - BA Fashion Design: Menswear student, London College of Fashion***

# FINDINGS

## 04 ASSESSMENT DESIGN IS A STRUCTURAL CAUSE OF CREATIVE BURNOUT

This observation reflects a wider concern in higher education research that assessment design shapes the type of learning that occurs. When students are required to manage multiple high-stakes tasks simultaneously, they may focus on producing work that satisfies minimum criteria rather than exploring more ambitious or experimental ideas6. In creative education, this can undermine key pedagogical aims such as risk-taking, experimentation, and the development of a personal creative voice.

Students also highlighted the difficulty of managing different modes of work within the same timeframe. Creative degrees often combine written academic components with studio-based or practice-based work, each requiring different forms of concentration and workflow.

One Fine Art student described how the overlap between dissertation work and studio practice created a conflict between these two modes of learning.

***"I feel like with Fine Art, you're either writing or you're doing your practical work. So then people weren't making at all. Fine art is just a very practical subject and it's very independent-led. So, you know, majority of people on the Fine Art course and across UAL are dyslexic. We chose this course to suit us." - BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins***

This point highlights a less frequently discussed dimension of assessment design, that the cognitive and creative switching costs involved in moving between different types of work. Writing a dissertation, developing a portfolio, and producing studio work each require distinct modes of thinking and time management. When these tasks are scheduled concurrently, students may struggle to maintain creative momentum.

Students also reported challenges related to the clarity and communication of assessment expectations. In some cases, deadlines and assessment criteria were perceived as unclear or communicated too late for effective planning.

***"I thought that it's maybe my English because it's my second language and sometimes it's confusing. But talking to my other peers, I realise that it's not just about me. And despite having so many explanations, PowerPoints, presentations and descriptions... deadlines or [assessment] criteria are not really clear to people. And sometimes we are on our own for like two months and all of the deadlines are announced altogether." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

The same student went on to describe how late announcements of deadlines made it difficult to plan work effectively:

***"Having deadlines being announced like 2 weeks before that is just, I can't plan things for that and I can't be ready for that." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

# FINDINGS

## 04 ASSESSMENT DESIGN IS A STRUCTURAL CAUSE OF CREATIVE BURNOUT

Transparent assessment design allows students to organise their workload and manage complex projects more effectively. When deadlines or expectations are unclear, students may experience additional stress and uncertainty, which can contribute to burnout.

The focus group discussions suggest that creative burnout is often shaped by how assessment is structured and communicated across programmes. Best practice in higher education increasingly emphasises the importance of 'assessment for learning', where tasks are carefully sequenced to support development rather than simply measure outcomes. In creative disciplines, this often involves designing assessment structures that allow time for experimentation, reflection, and iterative development. When assessment tasks are clustered, poorly sequenced, or insufficiently coordinated across modules, these developmental processes can be disrupted.

The experiences described by students in this research suggest that addressing creative burnout may therefore require a closer examination of programme-level assessment design, rather than focusing solely on individual modules. Ensuring that deadlines are coordinated across courses, that expectations are communicated clearly, and that students have sufficient time to engage deeply with creative processes may help reduce some of the structural pressures that contribute to burnout.

More broadly, these findings highlight the importance of recognising that creative work does not always develop according to predictable schedules. Creative processes often involve periods of uncertainty, experimentation, and incubation before ideas take shape. Assessment structures that assume continuous productivity may therefore unintentionally place students under pressure to produce work before ideas have had time to develop.

By reconsidering how assessments are paced and sequenced, UAL may be able to create learning environments that better support both creative development and student wellbeing.

# FINDINGS

## 05 RESOURCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRAINTS ARE PART OF THE BURNOUT PROBLEM

Students made clear that creative burnout is not shaped only by workload or assessment design, but also by the material conditions under which creative work takes place. Access to studio space, workshops, storage, technicians, travel between sites, and the cost of materials were all identified as factors that influence what students can realistically produce and how much pressure they experience while doing so.

Unlike many essay-based disciplines, creative courses often require access to physical space, specialist equipment, and technical support in order to develop work. When access to these resources is limited or uneven, students may find themselves competing for time, adapting projects to fit available facilities, or rushing work to meet submission deadlines before resources become unavailable.

One student highlighted the pressure created by limited access to technical support: ***"I usually spend most of the time in an Archway, but I think there are so many students there, but there is a lack of technicians' time and there are not many technicians. So there is a kind of limit to access to the workshop. So, because of that, I think quite a lot of student are struggling with to keep their work." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

This comment reflects a broader issue within studio-based learning environments, that the availability of workshops and technical staff can significantly shape how students develop their projects. When large cohorts are sharing limited facilities, students may struggle to access the support or equipment needed to realise their ideas. This can lead to delays, rushed work, or the need to scale down projects in order to meet deadlines.

Participants also highlighted the importance of studio space and storage for developing larger projects. Creative work often evolves through experimentation with scale, materials, and physical form. When space is limited or unavailable, students may feel compelled to alter their ideas to fit practical constraints rather than creative intent.

***"We don't have a lot of space at home because we're international students. The school always shuts down the studio in the summer, because they use it for summer school. Now we are thinking there is nowhere to store my large sculpture or large pieces. So instead, we decide to do digital work that doesn't require physical storage, even if that's not what we want to do." - MA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins***

This illustrates how resource constraints can shape not only the experience of creative study, but also the nature of the work that students produce. When access to space, materials, or technical support is limited, students may be forced to simplify projects, change mediums, or abandon more ambitious ideas altogether.

# FINDINGS

## 05 RESOURCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRAINTS ARE PART OF THE BURNOUT PROBLEM

Importantly, these pressures interact with other factors identified in the focus groups, such as deadline clustering and the expectation to produce original work. When students are already managing multiple assessments and struggling with creative block, additional logistical barriers (such as booking workshop time, travelling between campuses, or finding space to store work) can intensify feelings of exhaustion and frustration.

In this sense, resource and infrastructure issues are not peripheral to the problem of creative burnout. They form part of the structural environment in which creative learning takes place, shaping what students are able to make, how they manage their time, and how much energy they must expend simply navigating the conditions of study.

Recognising the role of these material conditions is therefore important when considering institutional responses to creative burnout. Addressing burnout in creative education may require not only changes to pedagogy or assessment design, but also careful attention to the physical and logistical environments that support creative practice, including access to studio space, technical staff, and facilities.

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## 06 STUDENTS WANT INDUSTRY RELEVANCE BUT SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

A recurring tension that surfaced across the focus groups was the idea that the intensity of creative courses is sometimes framed as preparation for the realities of the creative industries. Students frequently referred to the argument that high workloads, multiple simultaneous briefs, and tight deadlines reflect the kinds of conditions they may encounter in professional creative environments.

Participants' responses to this idea were mixed. Some students acknowledged that creative industries can be fast-paced and suggested that experiencing demanding projects during university could help prepare them for professional practice. For these students, the challenge of managing multiple briefs or deadlines was sometimes understood as part of developing resilience and professional capability.

One student described this as a form of training that could help build capacity for future work: ***"I don't mind being bombarded by different briefs and assessments and things like that. If I think that is really helpful for me and I'm like building muscles, that's why I'm here for." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

In this view, the pressure associated with creative projects can be interpreted as a form of professional preparation. If the intensity of work is clearly linked to developing industry-relevant skills, some students are willing to accept demanding workloads as part of their education.

# FINDINGS

## 05 STUDENTS WANT INDUSTRY RELEVANCE BUT SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

However, this perspective was not universally shared. Other participants questioned the assumption that academic workloads should replicate the pressures of professional environments. Some students felt that this argument was sometimes implied but not clearly explained or justified within the structure of their courses.

One student reflected that although the **"industry preparation"** narrative could make sense in theory, it did not fully account for the realities of studying at university:

***"I mean, that narrative [that creative pressure replicates industry expectations] was never explained to us. This could be a good reason, yes. But if I think about it, if I'm getting like 5 deliverables expected from the client, I'm also getting paid for it." - MA Service Design student, London College of Communication***

This comment highlights a key distinction raised by several students, that while university courses may simulate aspects of industry workflows, students do not necessarily have access to the same resources, infrastructure, or compensation that exist in professional contexts. Creative professionals typically work within teams, have access to organisational resources, and are paid for their labour. By contrast, students often manage projects individually while also covering the costs of materials, software, and production themselves.

Participants also suggested that while some projects may resemble real-world briefs, the context in which they are completed differs significantly from professional practice. For example, projects may be completed alongside other assessments, part-time work, and personal financial pressures. As a result, what is framed as "industry preparation" can sometimes feel more like an accumulation of demands without the support structures that exist in professional settings.

These perspectives suggest that students do not necessarily reject the idea that creative education should prepare them for professional practice. However, many questioned whether burnout should be treated as an inevitable or desirable part of that preparation.

The distinction between preparing students for industry and replicating the most unsustainable aspects of industry culture was particularly important. Students suggested that universities have an opportunity to model healthier approaches to creative work, rather than simply reproducing the pressures associated with precarious or high-intensity creative labour.

# FINDINGS

## 05 STUDENTS WANT INDUSTRY RELEVANCE BUT SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

These discussions highlight an important tension within creative education. Universities often aim to ensure that graduates are ready to enter competitive creative industries, but students are also paying for an educational experience that should support experimentation, learning, personal development, and even failure. When academic workloads mirror the pressures of professional practice without providing comparable resources or support, students may experience this as an additional source of creative burnout.

Recognising this distinction may therefore be important when considering how creative courses frame industry preparation. Rather than presenting intense workloads as an unavoidable reality of creative work, universities may have an opportunity to prepare students for professional practice while also modelling sustainable creative working practices that support long-term wellbeing and creative development.

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## 06 STUDENTS OFTEN DEVELOP SYSTEMS FOR COPING WITH CREATIVE BURNOUT ALONE

Students across the focus groups described a range of experiences with academic and pastoral support. While some participants highlighted positive interactions with tutors, workshops, and peers around creative burnout, the overall pattern that emerged was one of inconsistency. Support was often experienced as dependent on individual tutors, particular modules, or informal peer networks rather than forming part of a consistent institutional approach to creative burnout.

Several students spoke positively about moments when they were able to step outside the pressure of their current project and reconnect with creative thinking in a lower-stakes environment. For example, one Design Management student described how academic support workshops that focus on drawing or alternative media can help interrupt periods of creative stagnation.

***"Something that helps me while there's a creative block is academic support having workshops on resourcing through art or different mediums, such as drawing. So that gives you a break from your train of thought."*** **- MA Design Management student, London College of Communication**

Participants also identified other activities that helped restore momentum in creative work, including field trips, informal critique conversations, and interim deadlines that break large projects into smaller stages. Participants emphasised the value of peer-to-peer explanation of work, suggesting that simply talking through ideas with other students could help unlock new directions.

# FINDINGS

## 06 STUDENTS OFTEN DEVELOP SYSTEMS FOR COPING WITH CREATIVE BURNOUT ALONE

These discussions highlight an important tension within creative education. Universities often aim to ensure that graduates are ready to enter competitive creative industries, but students are also paying for an educational experience that should support experimentation, learning, personal development, and even failure. When academic workloads mirror the pressures of professional practice without providing comparable resources or support, students may experience this as an additional source of creative burnout.

Recognising this distinction may therefore be important when considering how creative courses frame industry preparation. Rather than presenting intense workloads as an unavoidable reality of creative work, universities may have an opportunity to prepare students for professional practice while also modelling sustainable creative working practices that support long-term wellbeing and creative development.

Another student described the positive benefits of attending a creative wellbeing event facilitated by the Students' Union:

***"I was also struggling with burnout and my work process wasn't really progressing. But when I participated in the Quilting Bee at LCF, it really helped. Since it was a workshop unrelated to my current work and the materials were provided, there was no financial stress, which was great. I really enjoyed it and found it very satisfying. And in the end, it even led to ideas for my own personal work." - MA Art and Science student, Central Saint Martins***

Despite these positive examples, many students felt that support structures were not consistently embedded across their courses. Instead, students often described learning to manage creative burnout largely on their own.

One Fine Art student described how they had developed a personal approach to managing periods of burnout by recognising that there are times when progress simply stalls:

***"There are times of year where I do absolutely nothing. I feel like that's like with life, sometimes things happen and then you just like acknowledge it, okay, it's best for me to let this go. Do nothing, rather than do something and keep stopping and starting." - BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins***

While this strategy helped them cope with creative cycles, they also noted that this kind of experience was rarely acknowledged within the formal expectations of the course:

***"I don't know if my course would approve of this approach. I don't think the university says, 'oh yeah, do nothing. We accept that'. But I had to figure out what works for me and my creative process." - BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins***

# FINDINGS

## 06 STUDENTS OFTEN DEVELOP SYSTEMS FOR COPING WITH CREATIVE BURNOUT ALONE

This comment reflects a broader tension identified throughout the focus groups: students often recognise that creative work involves cycles of activity and rest, but feel that institutional structures tend to assume continuous productivity. The same student also described situations where prolonged creative stagnation went unnoticed within their course, despite regular tutorial meetings:

***"I feel like they [the university] do also need to be better at picking up on things like, okay, this person has actually done nothing. I showed the same work to my tutor for three months. She didn't say anything. I was just thinking like, does this not look familiar to you at all?"*** **- BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins**

This example illustrates how burnout can sometimes remain invisible within academic supervision structures. If tutors are not explicitly looking for signs of creative stagnation or disengagement, students may continue to struggle without intervention or guidance.

Across the discussions, students suggested that this lack of consistent recognition means they often have to identify and manage creative burnout independently. Many participants described developing their own coping strategies, such as taking breaks from projects, reframing expectations, or seeking support informally from peers.

While these self-developed strategies can be effective, relying on individual coping mechanisms places a significant burden on students. Rather than encountering structured guidance on how to navigate creative blocks, many felt they had to self-diagnose, self-manage, and self-accommodate periods of burnout.

***"I just needed something separate from my original course that I signed up for. And actually, that's allowed me time to reflect, the time and space to kind of appreciate my course more from a distance, and give my head some space to think about something else." - BA Fashion Styling and Production student, London College of Fashion***

While supportive practices do exist within courses, they are often unevenly distributed and dependent on individual initiative. This raises an important question for creative education: whether institutions could play a more proactive role in recognising the cyclical nature of creative work and providing structured support for students navigating periods of creative burnout.

A more consistent approach to support might involve embedding practices that encourage reflection, experimentation, and temporary disengagement from stalled projects, rather than leaving students to manage these challenges alone. By acknowledging that creative processes naturally include periods of uncertainty and stagnation, universities may be able to create learning environments that better support both creative development and student wellbeing.

FINDINGS

## 07 FOUNDATION STUDY AS A SITE FOR DEVELOPING RESILIENCE

At UAL, a Foundation year typically refers to the UAL Foundation Diploma in Art and Design, a one-year pre-degree programme designed to prepare students for undergraduate study in art, design, fashion, and related creative disciplines. The course introduces students to a range of creative practices and encourages experimentation across different media before specialising in a chosen pathway.

Foundation programmes focus on developing core skills that underpin creative study, including independent research, iterative making, responding to critique, and managing open-ended project briefs. They are widely recognised within UK art and design education as a transitional year that helps students move from more structured school-based learning into the self-directed, exploratory learning environment of art school.

In the discussions across the focus groups of this study, Foundation was frequently cited as a period in which students learned how to manage the rhythms and expectations of creative education. Participants suggested that Foundation helped them adjust to open-ended briefs, sustained project work, and the need to organise their time independently. In this sense, Foundation appeared to function as a form of transition support between more structured educational environments and the comparatively self-directed demands of degree-level creative study.

One student reflected that Foundation had been particularly helpful because it offered a bridge into independent practice while still providing enough structure to learn how to work that way:

***"Foundation was really helpful because it still had structure, but it also taught you how to work more independently. I think if I hadn't done Foundation, burnout would have hit much earlier." - BA Fine Art student, Central Saint Martins***

This is significant because it suggests that burnout may not arise only from workload or assessment intensity, but also from the shock of transition into creative higher education. Students who arrive at degree level without prior experience of managing long-form projects, self-directed research, and iterative making may be more vulnerable to burnout because they are simultaneously trying to learn disciplinary content and adapt to an entirely new way of working.

A related point emerged in another group, where students suggested that those who had completed Foundation were often better able to cope with deadlines and periods of intense project work because they had already experienced something similar:

# FINDINGS

## 07 FOUNDATION STUDY AS A SITE FOR DEVELOPING RESILIENCE

***"People who've done Foundation seem more prepared for deadlines and burnout because they've already had those really intense projects before."*** **- BA Fashion Design Technology: Womenswear student, London College of Fashion**

Students in this research highlighted that the Foundation year often felt more structured than degree-level study, with clearer timetables, core contact hours, and a stronger emphasis on hands-on teaching. Participants described the experience as having more regular studio time, closer tutor support, and more explicit development of practical skills. In some cases, students compared the structure of Foundation to school, noting that the clearer rhythm of classes, workshops, and guided activities helped them develop creative working habits before moving into the greater independence expected at undergraduate level.

***"I did the foundation year as well and [when you start your undergrad] it's not structured, and also it's different every week. And for people who love routine, it can be extremely stressful."*** **- BA Product and Industrial Design student, Central Saint Martins**

This points to Foundation as an early rehearsal space for the pressures of creative education. Students may encounter intense workloads there too, but the difference appears that Foundation can provide a setting in which those demands are introduced gradually, with more explicit scaffolding and support around how to handle them.

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## 08 STUDENTS VALUE CANDOUR FROM INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

Alongside changes to course structure and support systems, students also expressed interest in greater openness about creative burnout within both the university and the creative industries more broadly. Many participants felt that burnout is widely experienced within creative fields but is rarely discussed openly in educational contexts. As a result, students often encounter creative block or exhaustion without a clear sense of whether these experiences are normal or how professionals navigate them.

Several students suggested that hearing more directly from working creative practitioners about how they manage periods of creative stagnation, exhaustion, or loss of inspiration would be valuable. Students often felt that industry speakers were invited primarily to discuss career pathways, professional achievements, or portfolio development. While these insights were appreciated, participants suggested that conversations rarely addressed the more difficult aspects of creative work, including burnout, creative block, or maintaining motivation over long periods.

# FINDINGS

## 08 STUDENTS VALUE CANDOUR FROM INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

***"It would be really helpful if people from industry talked honestly about how they deal with creative burnout. We hear a lot about success and portfolios, but not much about the moments when you're stuck or exhausted."* - BA Graphic and Media Design student, London College of Communication**

Students suggested that hearing honest reflections from practitioners about how they manage creative pressure could help normalise these experiences and provide practical strategies for coping with them. This might include discussions about how professionals sustain creative practice over time, how they recover from periods of burnout, and how they balance creative work with rest, collaboration, or other forms of inspiration.

These kinds of conversations were seen as particularly valuable because they could challenge the perception that successful creative careers require constant productivity or relentless originality. Many students described feeling pressure to remain continuously creative, which can make periods of creative block feel like personal failure rather than a normal stage in the creative process.

***"When guest speakers come in, it would be interesting if they talked about the difficult parts of the job as well, like when you run out of ideas or when you're overwhelmed with briefs, and how they actually deal with that." - BA Product and Industrial Design student, Central Saint Martins***

Greater openness from industry professionals could therefore help students develop a more realistic understanding of how creative work unfolds over time. Rather than presenting creativity as a constant flow of ideas, these discussions could highlight the cyclical nature of creative practice, including phases of exploration, stagnation, reflection, and renewal.

Participants also suggested that universities could play a role in modelling this openness within their own teaching practices. Tutors and course leaders who acknowledge the realities of creative block or burnout may help students feel more comfortable discussing these experiences and seeking support when needed. In contrast, when courses implicitly assume that students should always be productive and inspired, students may feel pressure to hide periods of burnout or disengagement.

***"Sometimes it feels like everyone is expected to always be inspired. But if tutors talked more openly about creative burnout as part of the process, it would make it easier to talk about. Creative work isn't a straight line, there are moments where nothing is happening. If that was acknowledged more in the course, it would take a lot of pressure off." - BA Fine Art student, Chelsea College of Arts***

More open conversations about creative burnout could also help shift the focus from individual resilience to collective understanding of how creative processes function. Recognising that creative practice often involves cycles of productivity and rest may encourage more sustainable approaches to learning and professional development.

# FINDINGS

## 08 STUDENTS VALUE CANDOUR FROM INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

“In this sense, students did not necessarily ask universities to eliminate pressure from creative education altogether. Instead, they expressed a desire for greater honesty about the realities of creative work and more opportunities to learn from practitioners who have developed strategies for sustaining creativity over time.

Embedding these kinds of discussions within courses (through more guest lectures, industry panels, workshops, or reflective teaching practices) could help students develop a more sustainable understanding of creative practice, while also reinforcing the idea that periods of creative burnout are not simply personal shortcomings but part of a broader creative process that can be navigated and managed.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**The findings suggest that creative burnout should be understood not only as a wellbeing issue, but as a pedagogical, structural, and cultural issue within creative higher education. Students did describe personal coping strategies, but the dominant pattern across the focus groups was that burnout is shaped by how creative education is organised, how work is assessed, how time is structured, how resources are distributed, and how openly creative struggle is acknowledged.**

**The findings point toward a set of recommendations for both UAL and Arts Students' Union, with a particular emphasis on structural change.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 01 REVIEW PROGRAMME-LEVEL ASSESSMENT DESIGN TO REDUCE CLUSTERING AND OVERLOAD

One of the clearest findings from the research is that burnout is intensified by deadline clustering, overlapping assessment tasks, and poorly sequenced workloads. Students repeatedly described situations in which multiple major submissions were due within the same week, or even on the same day, often requiring different formats and modes of working.

UAL should therefore review assessment not only at module level, but at programme level, to understand how submissions accumulate across the student experience.

This should include:

- Reducing instances of multiple major deliverables being due simultaneously
- Avoiding the bunching of written, portfolio, and practical assessments into short timeframes
- Building more space between major projects to allow for reflection and recovery
- Sequencing assessment in ways that support iterative development rather than crisis-driven submission

A more coordinated approach to assessment design would help ensure that students are not pushed into survival-mode working, where the priority becomes completion rather than experimentation or quality.

## 02 CONTINUE TO RECOGNISE THAT CREATIVE PROCESSES ARE NON-LINEAR AND FURTHER EMBED THIS INTO COURSE DESIGN

A central theme across the focus groups was that creative work does not always develop in a steady, predictable way. Students described periods of experimentation, stagnation, uncertainty, and renewed inspiration as normal parts of creative practice. However, many felt that course structures assume continuous productivity and do not allow enough room for these rhythms.

UAL should consider how teaching and assessment can better reflect the non-linear nature of creative development.

This should include:

- Building in more space for experimentation, incubation, and revision
- Breaking longer projects into developmental stages with formative checkpoints
- Allowing more opportunities for students to reflect on process, not only final output
- Acknowledging that creative block and pauses in momentum are part of practice, not always signs of failure

This would help move the institutional culture away from an assumption that creativity should always be available on demand.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 03 MAKE EXPECTATIONS, CRITERIA, AND TIMELINES CLEARER AND EARLIER

Students frequently linked burnout to unclear expectations, late communication of deadlines, and uncertainty around what was actually being assessed. This created additional stress, especially on courses with open-ended briefs or interdisciplinary outputs.

UAL should consider how teaching and assessment can better reflect the non-linear nature of creative development. This could include:

- Building in more space for experimentation, incubation, and revision
- Breaking longer projects into developmental stages with formative checkpoints
- Allowing more opportunities for students to reflect on process, not only final output
- Acknowledging that creative block and pauses in momentum are part of practice, not always signs of failure

This would help move the institutional culture away from an assumption that creativity should always be available on demand.

## 04 ENSURE WRITTEN AND PRACTICAL WORK FEELS COMPLEMENTARY ON MAKING COURSES

Students on practice-based courses, especially Fine Art and interdisciplinary programmes, described the difficulty of switching between written academic work and studio practice. Several participants felt that overlapping dissertations, portfolios, essays, and practical outputs created competing demands that undermined both forms of work.

UAL should review the relationship between written and practice-based assessment to ensure that:

- Different modes of work are not unnecessarily competing in the same period
- Practice-based courses are set meaningful written requirements that complement, rather than disrupt, the process of making
- Students are supported in managing the cognitive shift between different forms of assessment

This does not mean reducing academic rigour, but it does suggest a need to think more carefully about how different types of learning are scheduled and integrated.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 05 IMPROVE ACCESS TO SPACE, TECHNICIANS, MATERIALS, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The findings make clear that creative burnout is also shaped by the material conditions of making work. Burnout was intensified when students struggled to access workshops, technicians, storage, studio space, or the materials needed to realise their ideas. In some cases, these limitations forced students to reduce the scale or ambition of their work.

From a structural university perspective, this suggests a need to review the adequacy and accessibility of the physical conditions that support creative learning. UAL should consider:

- Whether technical support is sufficient for student demand
- Whether workshop access is equitable and manageable across cohorts
- How storage and studio access affect what students are able to make
- Whether summer studio closures or resource restrictions disproportionately affect certain students
- How travel between sites creates additional burdens for students on multi-site courses

These issues are not marginal. They directly shape the kinds of work students can produce and the amount of energy they must expend simply to keep projects moving.

## 06 LEARN FROM FOUNDATION PEDAGOGY TO SUPPORT TRANSITION INTO DEGREE-LEVEL CREATIVE STUDY

A particularly important insight from the focus groups was that students who had completed a Foundation year often felt better prepared for the demands of creative higher education. They described Foundation as offering more structure, clearer rhythms, more hands-on teaching, and a gradual introduction to independent creative working.

UAL should consider what undergraduate and postgraduate courses can learn from this. In particular, degree programmes could adopt some of the transitional strengths of Foundation by:

- Offering clearer structure in early stages of study
- Creating more consistent contact hours or studio-based guidance in first year
- Recognising that not all students arrive equally prepared for the demands of self-directed creative study

This is especially important for students coming directly from school, from non-creative educational backgrounds, or from work.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 07 DEVELOP A CLEARER INSTITUTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF CREATIVE BURNOUT

The findings suggest that students often experience creative burnout as something distinct from general stress, but feel that the university does not always recognise it as such. Students described burnout as involving creative block, loss of inspiration, emotional depletion, and reduced experimentation, rather than just tiredness or workload pressure.

UAL should therefore consider developing a clearer institutional language around creative burnout. This could include:

- Recognising creative burnout within wellbeing, academic support, and teaching guidance
- Helping tutors and course leaders identify the signs of creative stagnation or disengagement
- Acknowledging the relationship between burnout, confidence, and identity in creative disciplines
- Ensuring that support services understand the particular features of creative practice

A clearer shared understanding would help move the conversation away from individual blame and toward more meaningful support.

In addition to this, participants consistently suggested that creative burnout is rarely discussed openly enough. Many felt that there is an implicit expectation within creative education that students should always be productive, inspired, and able to generate ideas. This can make burnout feel like personal failure rather than a common feature of sustained creative work.

UAL should work toward a culture in which creative burnout is discussed more openly and constructively.

This could include:

- Tutors acknowledging that creative block and periods of stagnation are normal
- Embedding discussions of burnout and recovery into course induction or professional practice modules
- Normalising conversation about creative cycles, rest, and replenishment
- Creating space for students to discuss how they work, not just what they produce

A more open culture could reduce shame, encourage earlier help-seeking, and make creative struggle feel more discussable.

## 08 TRAIN STAFF TO RECOGNISE BURNOUT EARLIER AND RESPOND MORE PROACTIVELY

A recurring concern in the focus groups was that students often felt they had to manage creative burnout alone, and that signs of stagnation or disengagement sometimes went unnoticed by staff. Some students described showing the same work for long periods, or making no progress, without tutors recognising this as a sign that support might be needed.

UAL should support staff to recognise and respond to burnout more consistently. This could include staff development on:

- Identifying signs of creative stagnation or depletion
- Responding sensitively to students who are stuck or disengaged
- Understanding the emotional stakes of creative assessment and critique
- Recognising how identity, confidence, and burnout may be linked in creative work

This does not mean expecting tutors to become counsellors. Rather, it means equipping them to identify patterns early and respond with pedagogical, rather than purely pastoral, awareness.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 09 EMBED LOW-PRESSURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPERIMENTATION, PEER EXCHANGE, AND CREATIVE RECOVERY

The findings make clear that creative burnout is also shaped by the material conditions of making work. Burnout was intensified when students struggled to access workshops, technicians, storage, studio space, or the materials needed to realise their ideas. In some cases, these limitations forced students to reduce the scale or ambition of their work.

UAL and Arts SU could build on this by creating more opportunities for:

- Peer-to-peer discussion of works-in-progress outside of the classroom space
- Cross-course creative recovery spaces, such as facilitated sessions specifically for students who feel stuck on a project, or “creative reset” sessions designed to interrupt burnout cycles.
- Hands-on workshops unrelated to assessed outputs
- Informal making sessions where materials are provided
- Events that encourage play, experimentation, and idea generation without evaluation

These kinds of practices can be especially helpful because they interrupt stagnation and allow students to re-enter their work from a different angle.

## 10 HOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS TO TALK HONESTLY ABOUT SUSTAINABLE CREATIVE PRACTICE

Participants consistently cited a desire for industry practitioners to talk honestly about how they manage creative pressure, recover inspiration, and sustain their work over time.

UAL could strengthen this aspect of professional preparation by inviting industry practitioners to discuss:

- How they cope with creative block and burnout
- How they manage multiple briefs in practice
- How collaboration, rest, and time away from projects support creative work
- How they maintain long-term creative sustainability

This would help students develop a more realistic and humane understanding of creative careers, and counter the idea that constant productivity is the norm.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 11 REFRAME "INDUSTRY PREPARATION" AROUND SUSTAINABILITY, NOT ENDURANCE

Participants were divided on whether intense workloads are justified as preparation for industry. Some accepted that fast-paced working is part of professional life. However, many also questioned whether universities should reproduce the most exploitative or unsustainable features of the creative sector, especially when students are not being paid and often lack access to equivalent resources.

UAL should therefore be cautious about using "industry realism" to justify burnout-inducing course design.

Instead, the university could position itself as a place that prepares students for the sector while also modelling better ways of working.

That means preparing students for deadlines and briefs, but also for:

- Setting realistic expectations
- Recognising when creative work is becoming unsustainable
- Understanding the value of rest and recovery
- Developing long-term creative resilience rather than short-term endurance

## 12 CONSIDER HOW CRITIQUE AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES INTERSECT WITH BURNOUT

Although this project did not focus only on crits, the findings strongly suggest that burnout is intensified by the personal and emotionally exposing nature of feedback in creative disciplines. This connects closely to earlier Arts SU research on crits and inclusive learning.

UAL should continue to review how critique is facilitated, especially where work is identity-based or personally revealing. This may include:

- Clearer tutor guidance on inclusive and supportive critique
- Preparation for students on how to give and receive feedback
- Stronger boundaries where discussion shifts from the work to the student's identity
- Sensitivity to the cumulative emotional load of repeated exposure through assessed creative work

This is especially important for marginalised students, who may carry additional pressures in critique spaces.

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