

V&A 'Design For Life' Exhibition
Report on a qualitative and quantitative study
undertaken by TWRResearch over the period
May-June 2010



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Background and objectives

In partnership with five regional museums and galleries, the Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum implemented a unique 'Design For Life' exhibition. All the museums worked with Action for Children to reach informal education groups. The project sought to develop new ways of engaging young people in design. It provided them with opportunities to work alongside professional designers and gain inspiration from museum collections.

The V&A commissioned this research project to assess the success of the exhibition and achievement of its objectives. Also to gather information about customer satisfaction. The research project was undertaken by TWRResearch. The research approach combined both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Methodology & sample

The Qualitative phase consisted of random intercept interviews conducted by a director-level moderator. The interviews canvassed opinion and provided an invaluable subjective level to the analysis. It was important to observe visitor flow, dwell time and assess the quality of engagement with exhibits in a way that could inform the design of the quantitative questionnaire.

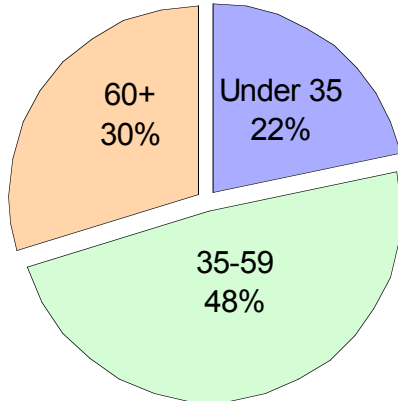
Two and a half days of qualitative intercepts interviews achieved a sample of 18 conversations, most of over 15 minute duration.

The sampling approach was random and conversations conducted with those willing and interested in participating.

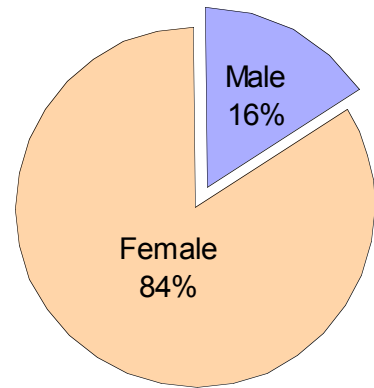
The qualitative sample included several who had not visited the museum before and who had specifically travelled from out of London to see the Quilts and/or Grace Kelly exhibitions. The interviews also included five who were specifically involved with education including one senior lecturer from St. Martin's College

The **Quantitative phase** consisted of 101 face-to-face interviews which were conducted among visitors to the exhibition, on exit, in early June 2010. The following sample was achieved.

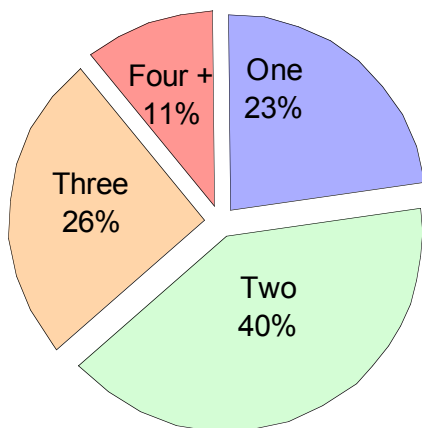
Respondent age



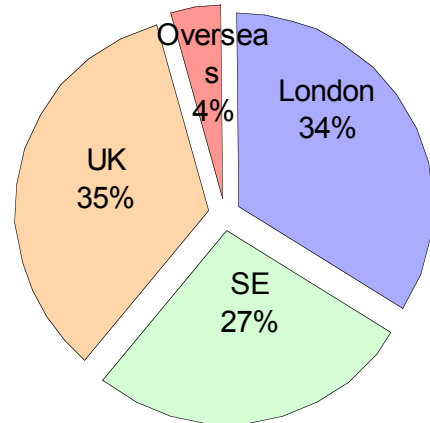
Respondent gender



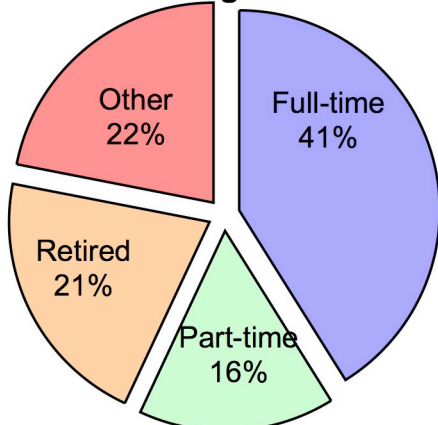
Number in group



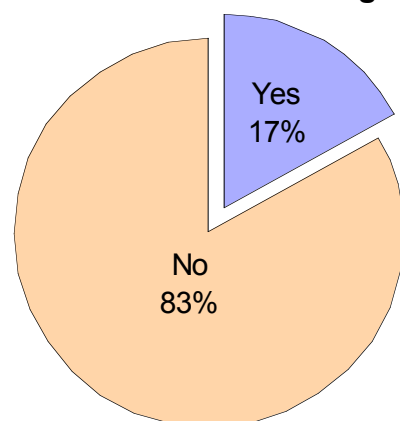
Where live



Working status



Work/teach in art/design?



Executive Summary of Analysis (qualitative & quantitative methodologies)

(i) Impact and Achievement

Design for Life (DFL) was extremely popular and, as the encounter was usually unexpected, it proved a revelatory and delightful discovery. The concept behind the show offered a very positive statement of the V&A's commitment to nurturing young talent and confirmed the museum as a pro-active and forward-facing institution.

The quality of the work was consistently praised and considered to be of a very high standard. It reflected well on both the skills of the young people involved and the mentoring & encouragement they had received.

The presence of DFL in the V&A also challenges perceptions. It makes what is expected to be a 'traditional' museum environment more contemporary, inclusive and less archival. This is no surprise and totally appropriate for those already familiar with the V&A. However, the lively work and presence of youthful aspirant designer/artists overturns any assumptions residing among occasional visitors that the museum is elitist or exclusive.

Design for Life was a surprise encounter for all the qualitative sample. No one knew of its presence though all left feeling it deserved to be actively promoted. It was frequently a chance discovery en-route to the cafe and as such, the location ensured a steady flow of visitors.

(ii) Points to Consider

Though the location encouraged significant levels of 'chance encounters' there were many who do not make the modest detour from the Asian Sculpture Galleries. For many, the intrigue does not stimulate sufficient curiosity to explore. The qualitative interviews suggested that the fashion mannequins provided the most inviting 'sightline' for attracting entrants.

Short dwell times of a few minutes were in evidence (in many cases qualitative respondents spent longer talking about the exhibition than looking at it). This is not unexpected for an exhibition that is unlikely to be a destination and which is modestly idiosyncratic when compared to the overall collection. However, limited dwell time carried implications to the engagement with exhibits (selective rather than comprehensive), the value of appealing sightlines to attract interest and resulted in limited reading & engagement with signage.

This is not a problem as the dominant mood on leaving was very positive. However, it did mean that many did not fully understand the qualifying and selection process of DFL and 'take-out' could be quite random. This specifically influenced appreciation of the role of partner museums and the contribution of 'Action for Children'.

The popularity of the show is indicated by the frequent assumption that it would return as an annual event, and suggestions that it justified more space and exhibits. Many also felt it deserved more marketing and celebration outside of the museum environment.

(iii) Quantitative research analysis can be summarised as follows:

- Most (85%) visitors are unaware of the exhibition before their visit
- Most (83%) visitors do not work in or teach art or design
- The majority (81%) had visited the V&A previously; of those, half had visited in the last year.
- The majority (64%) come alone or with one other person
- The exhibition was greatly enjoyed by visitors, across all age groups
- The selection process for participants was **not** clear to most
- For most (57%), to some extent the exhibition has enhanced their interest in design as a leisure interest
- The exhibition is considered to be very appropriate to the V&A collection
- Nearly all (98%) feel that the exhibition shows what young people can achieve when inspired by museum collections and working with designers.
- And most (83%) thought the design quality was 'exceptional'
- The exhibition raises awareness of the V&A's work with young people and demonstrates the value the V&A puts on the work of young people
- Most feel that the exhibition justifies publicity outside of the museum.
- Generally visitors were enthusiastic, considered it good for the V&A, and suggested making it a larger exhibition with more exhibits and better publicity

(iv) Implications and recommendations

Design for Life was a very popular initiative and as such carries positive implications for future outreach activity and the brand associations of the V&A (Positioning the V&A as pro-active, inclusive and developing young talent).

In terms of the on-site exhibition the following were key outcomes:

- The exhibit should be sited where the likelihood of chance encounter is high
- The signage and text boards within the exhibition should anticipate limited levels of reading and set a hierarchy of communication priorities (for example, if a visitor took away one piece of information about this show what should it be?)
- The youth of the participants was a revelatory surprise. There were calls for more information about the artists (perhaps photographs by the exhibits?)

- Many left uncertain as to the nature of the collaborative process and the role of the designers and mentors.
- The role of the partner museums and institutions could be clearer particularly as this provided a valuable statement that the V&A is not a London-focused institution.

In terms of publicity there were frequent suggestions that this was an appealing PR opportunity that deserved a higher media profile. Many wanted to know more about the qualifying stages and could see this as a major national event for schools and colleges.

Qualitative Interviews – Summary of analysis



(i) Location in the V&A

This was very rarely a planned destination but in most cases a chance encounter. Being situated just-off a main thoroughfare is useful for attracting visitors and the mood of the show and nature of exhibits offered a refreshing alternative to the more austere Asian sculpture rooms.

Two entrances can carry implications to the nature of impact and encounter. The dress designs and apparent catwalk proved to be an eye-catching draw. Consistently the door of entrance and first exhibits/signage encountered left the most lasting impressions. Many missed explanatory text and the reading of signage was unsurprisingly eclectic.



(ii) Design for Life – the concept

The concept behind DFL was extremely popular. As far as it was understood. The work was consistently considered impressive and particularly surprising given the age of the students. The bright colours, unusual materials and evident wit of many exhibits generated a very positive atmosphere. It was a very uplifting and optimistic encounter and provided a balancing counterpoint to the more academic galleries.

All the qualitative interviewees considered this a positive example of the V&A's commitment to nurturing young talent with a future-facing and inclusive scheme. The initiative carried implications to the V&A collection as a whole – it makes the museum environment seem more accessible, human and friendly. It also shows a desire to involve those beyond London-based and niche audience.



(iii) The Exhibits

The variety and range of exhibits contributed to a very relaxing and pleasing environment. For example, the playful 'snail light' was consistently popular and frequently photographed. The use and variety of materials was noted, particularly when using recycled materials or focusing on traditional & local industries (Sheffield steel).

The fashion display was particularly strong and frequently favourably compared to the museum's existing fashion collection. It was refreshing for many to consider how context and display are contributory factors to implied status and impact, and suggested that these were 'names to watch' for the future.

Many visitors wanted more information about the artists. Their youthfulness was often a revelation and deserved to be celebrated (there were suggestions that photographs of the young designers would be welcome).

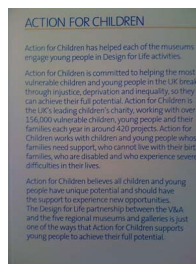
The project was evidently making careers in design seem more accessible and was welcomed for offering vocational direction and encouragement.



(iv) Creators and Collaborators

The presence of young creative talent in the V&A was very welcome. The initiative was considered very appropriate to an institution devoted to nurturing creative skills and encouraging the development of applied arts talents.

The recognition of regional partner institutions was important to assert relevance beyond the London audience. However, the limited reading of signage could limit appreciation. In the same vein, the lack of engagement with signage could result in visitors leaving wanting to know more and better understand the collaborative process.



(v) Signage and Text

Though the quantitative data would suggest that many felt the signage and text information was adequate the qualitative interviews contradicted this, suggesting that reading levels were highly dependent on the visitor and length of stay. In most cases reading was random rather than comprehensive and meant that many left impressed but not always clear as to the specifics of the DFL initiative.

For many dwell time was brief and interest in exhibits impulsive and selective. This was often an off-route detour and the first encounter influenced by which of the two entrances was used. The brief visit could at times result in confusion as the exhibits did not fit expectations; *"I thought it was more of the fashion collection until I walked in"* – female 50yrs plus.

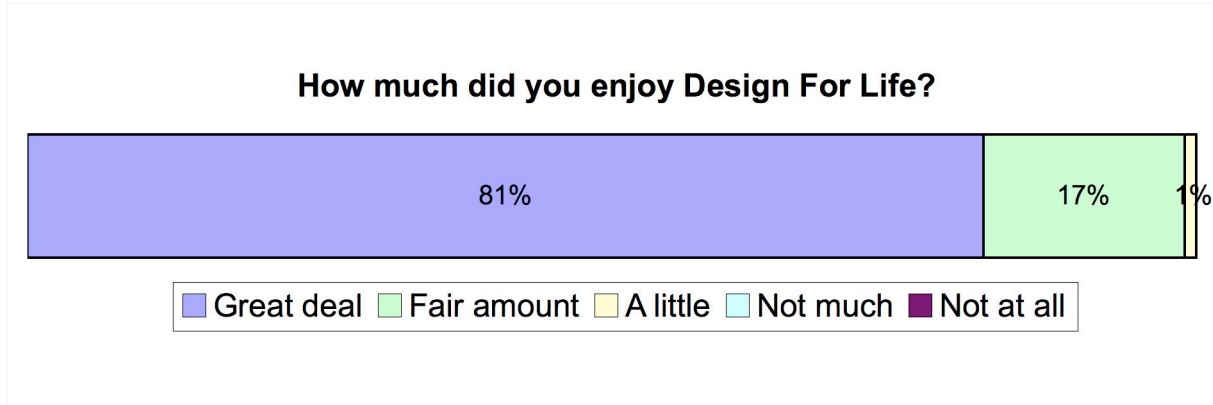
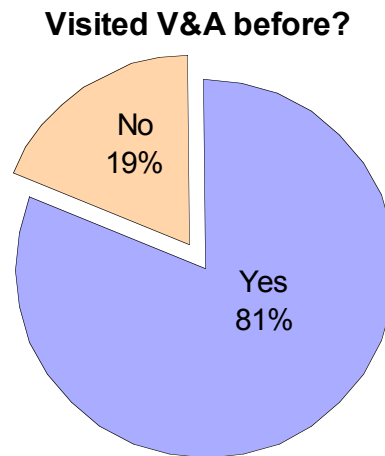
Of the eighteen qualitative interviews it is a reasonable estimate to suggest that at least half of those spoken to do not really understand process and rationale behind selection even though they were very positive regarding the end result, the exhibits and the welcome benefits of encouraging young people.

It is clearly valuable assisting and directing visitors toward primary messaging if it is felt important to convey a full understanding of objectives and process.

Quantitative Interviews – Summary of analysis

Advance publicity was not the main driver for visitors to the exhibition. The considerable majority (85% overall) ‘discovered’ the Design For Life on their visit. Those aged under 60 are slightly more likely to have heard about it in advance. 7% said they had seen information about it on the V&A web site, 5% had heard about it by word-of-mouth, and 3% had received a newsletter/ postcard from the V&A.

Four-in-five visitors to the exhibition had previously visited the V&A, particularly those coming alone (96%) and those living in London (91%), and older respondents. Among those who had been to the V&A before, half had not visited in the past year and a 27% had been once in the past year.

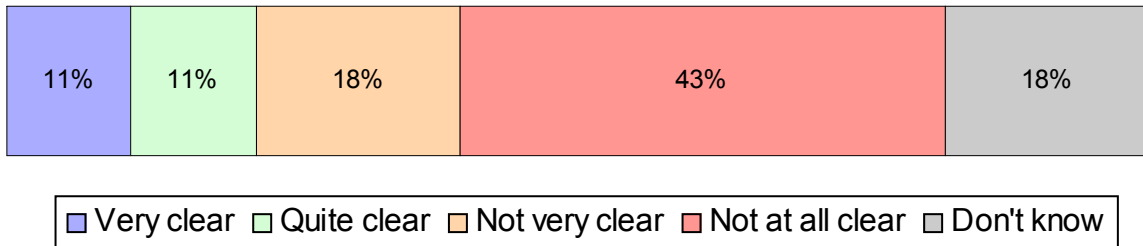


The involvement of children was the most appealing aspect, then recycling, and the imagination/inventiveness of those involved. Asked ‘What appealed to you most about the exhibition?’, the most frequently mentioned answers were:

The children/ ages of those involved	51%	Encourages other children, gives them opportunity	12%
Recycling things, and using rubbish	28%	The clothes, costumes	9%
The imagination and innovation of those involved	23%	The talent shown, clever	6%
It was different/ new/ new designs	14%	It was fun	5%

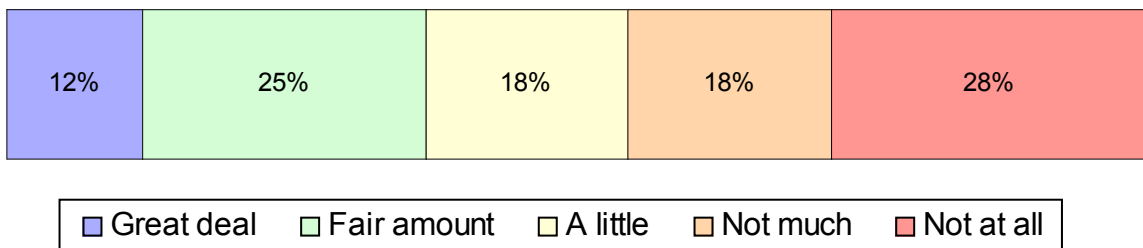
However, most did not understand the selection process for participating schools and colleges: 61% said it was not clear (43% said 'not clear at all'), and a further 18% said 'Don't know'. Those aged under 35 were rather clearer.

Did you understand the selection process?



To some extent at least the exhibition has enhanced visitor's interest in design as a leisure interest. This is most notable among those aged under 35 – 55% of whom said that their interest had been enhanced 'greatly' or 'a fair amount'.

Enhanced interest in design as leisure interest?

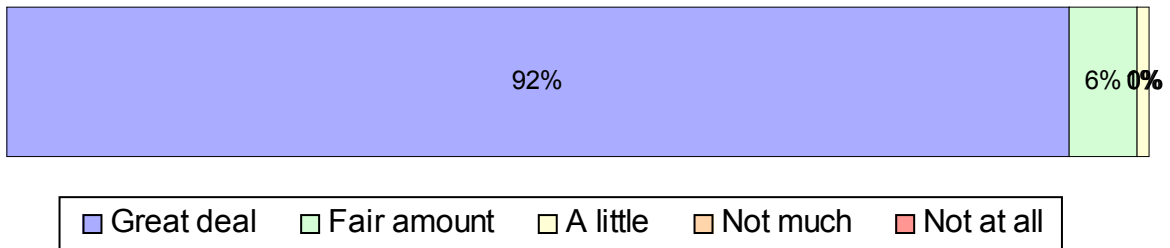


Some 16% said that the exhibition has some professional relevance to them – and 27% of those aged under 35. These were mainly teachers of related subjects. Nearly all visitors felt that the exhibition is appropriate to the V&A collection:

- 75% agree a great deal that it is appropriate
- 24% agree it is a 'fair amount' appropriate

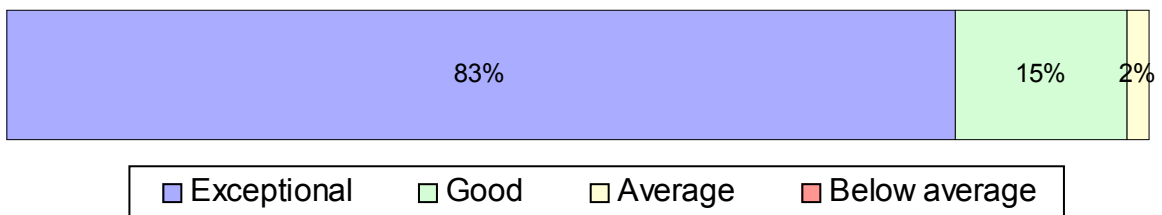
Nearly all visitors feel that the exhibition shows what young people can achieve when inspired by museum collections and working with designers.

Shows what young people can achieve when inspired?



The quality of the design work submitted by students was considered to be very good/exceptional. Appreciation was highest among those aged under 60, and among men (100% of men rated it as 'exceptional') rather more than women.

Quality of the design work submitted:

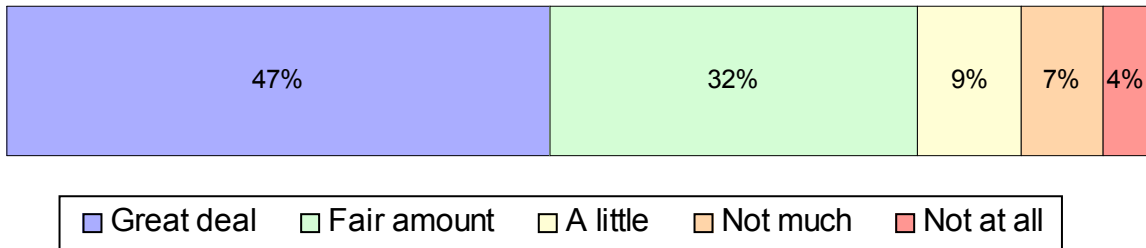


The exhibition raises awareness of the V&A's work with young people: 85% overall (and 95% of those aged under 35) said that awareness was raised a 'great deal', and a further 15% said it was raised a 'fair amount'.

The exhibition is also seen as demonstrating the value the V&A puts on the work of young people: 78% overall (and 86% of those aged under 35) say that this is demonstrated a 'great deal', plus a further 15% saying 'a fair amount'.

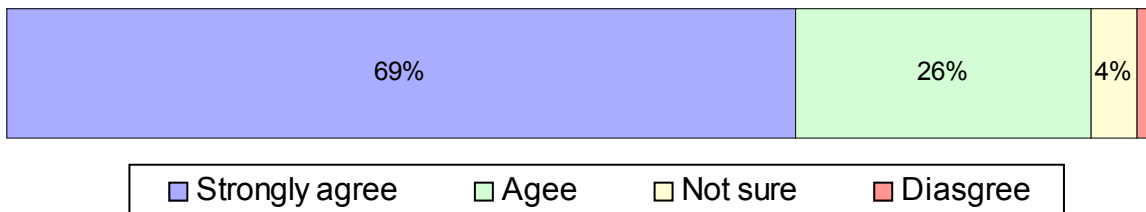
Although rather less strongly, the exhibition is also seen as demonstrating the V&A's work with regional partner museums, a view more strongly held among those who live in London than those who live outside of London/South East.

Demonstrates V&A's work with regional partner museums?



Most (95% overall) feel that the exhibition justifies publicity outside of the museum.

Exhibition justifies publicity outside of the museum?



Asked what questions people would want to ask about the exhibition, the most frequently mention topic was having more information about the schools/ children/artists involved, whilst others mentioned the selection process. Several said they would like to ask about the amount of preparation time involved. The most frequent responses were:

More about the schools/ children/artists involved	13%	Is it open to all schools, where all notified?	7%
About the selection process	9%	What were the inspirations, where the ideas came from	5%
The amount of preparation time/ how long to make	9%	The ages of the children involved	2%
Suggestion that it should be done more often/ followed up	7%		

Respondents were then asked for their spontaneous perceptions regarding the V&A's commitment to encouraging young designers. Many commented that it was good work and should be continued, and that it gets young people into the museum. The most frequent responses were:

Very good – keep up the good work	21%	Make it a regular thing	7%
Good commitment, well done	13%	Do it more/ more of this	4%
Inspires young people and gets them into museums	11%	Better publicised	2%
It's a good idea	8%		

Asked for criticisms, there were few. 10% suggested that it was not large enough, and 5% thought it was not well advertised.

Asked how this exhibition changes or enhances the way they think about the V&A, if at all, 60% made some comment. The most frequent observation was a view that it is modern, contemporary, keeping up with the times – mentioned by a quarter of respondents. 10% thought that the V&A exhibition was inspiring, spreading interest. 6% commented that it demonstrates working art and design at a museum.

When asked for suggestions in relation to the next time the V&A stages Design For Life, size, publicity and frequency were the three things mentioned most:

- 19% suggested making it larger, with more exhibits
- 13% thought there should be more/better publicity/promotion
- 6% said it should be done more often
- 5% thought it should be in a more prominent place in the museum or make it easier to find
- 4% would like to see Q&A sessions with kids present
- 3% mentioned having more schools involved

Outcomes and Recommendations



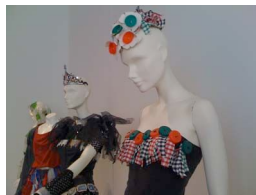
(i) Implications to the V&A

For all visitors Design for Life was a refreshing, popular and highly accessible initiative. It was often a discovery that many felt deserved to be better celebrated. (Though this was not a criticism rather an indication that many were glad that they had not missed the show).

For V&A regulars the concept is typical of the lively and refreshing environment that they already know well. For newcomers it was a welcome surprise and challenged stereotypic 'traditional museum' associations.

This was particularly important as many of the qualitative interviews were with V&A first timers specifically visiting for the Quilts or Grace Kelly exhibitions. It was valuable as an image-changing encounter for those who expected an austere and traditional museum environment.

The vivacious and optimistic mood of DFL was a primary and valued take out. It positioned the V&A as outward-looking and to be actively nurturing the talent of the future. The youthfulness and contemporary nature of DFL was very beneficial to overall perceptions of the V&A.



(ii) Issues to consider in the future

There were only a modest number of issues emerging that might be addressed with a future DFL exhibition.

For shorter dwell time visitors

- They did not always appreciate the young age of many of the students.
- Seldom understood the selection rationale for participant institutions.
- Did not always appreciate the relationship with partnership museums.

For longer dwell time visitors (many of whom were involved in education)

- They want to know how they can be involved and qualify for the 'scheme'.
- Interest in scale and breadth of the selection rationale & qualifying rounds.