Linda Matthews interviews Clare Knox-Bentham to find out more about her role, the work she does in the community and how this benefits students.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your role and the work that you do?

My role is to liaise with schools, community groups, museums, galleries and creative and cultural organisations to see how we can work together, and how Manchester School of Art can support and promote creativity in the region. I can help in a variety of ways, through providing volunteers or mentors from our undergraduate cohort, or linking organisations with graduate practitioners, to running independent projects in schools/galleries/museums or providing CPD for staff. I am a broker, finding where the opportunities are for the University and its students and filling gaps in provision with our partners. I also have a role to promote creativity across the region.
How does this benefit students?

Art and Design student are already very involved in the community doing all sorts of things independently; working with older people, disabled people, youth groups etc. My role involves looking to document this and to support students to capture evidence of the work that they are doing to add to their portfolio. It is about highlighting the employability skills and graduate behaviours of our students to themselves so that they can communicate these to prospective employers.

This year we have introduced the Art and Design Mentor scheme, which develops the roles of Art and Design student ambassadors to include specific training and to encourage them to capture evidence of their experience to improve their employability. At the end of their training, we hope to be able to offer them training as an Arts Award\(^1\) advisor, which would mean they would be able to work freelance delivering projects accrediting the work they do.

We have also implemented the Creative Teachers and Practitioners Network to act as a hub of communication for educators and practitioners across the region and to be a conduit for matching our undergraduates and graduate practitioners with relevant opportunities.

What does a successful day look like from your perspective?

That is a challenging question, as every day is different, but I will provide a couple of examples. I undertake visits to schools, museums and external organisations and a good day is when I meet an enthusiastic professional with similar values, who can offer good opportunities for our students. For example, I recently visited a local Primary School to consider volunteering opportunities for Art and Design students, but ended up implementing an After School Club, two school-based Sculpture Projects and signing up the school as a partner for Unit X. The success of these projects allowed the school to run a dedicated Arts Month, which, in turn, led to more voluntary opportunities for our students.

To draw on another example, I have recently met with a consultancy firm that enable arts project and they have all sorts of opportunities and services that might be of use to our students e.g. a venue finding service for young people so that they can work creatively together for example to play music. They are also looking for undergraduates and graduates to work and lead projects. They have a number of actual vacancies as well, so there is a potential for employment.

How does the work that you do benefit the community?

The community benefits enormously from the work that students do on creative projects. It is a virtuous circle as the community gains as much as our students. Recently Manchester School of

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\(^1\) [http://www.artsaward.org.uk/site/?id=64](http://www.artsaward.org.uk/site/?id=64)
Art has been working with Stockport Council, taking over two buildings in the Market Place in Stockport. This will create a creative hub for graduates, providing studio space for them to start up their own business. There will be flexible project space in a shop environment for student to use and we will be working in a community context, so can offer art related activities directly to the local people.

*How does your role connect to the curriculum?*

I also feed into Art and Design’s Unit X, which creates real world experience and opportunities for students, working with partners on real projects in real contexts. Unit X is a core unit for all Art and Design Students, allowing them the option to work in interdisciplinary teams in a range of contexts that reflect future graduate roles and entrepreneurial routes.

*Do you have any top tips for other staff at MMU about successful outreach work?*

It is useful to have some models of good practice, for example innovative projects or previous work to reassure prospective partners. Consider running a pilot project in the first instance to test the water. Use social media – face book and twitter to share what you do, so that your work is in the public domain. Create and build your networks.

*Thank you Clare!*