

The gap between education and work is widening. It is a genuine problem across the UK, and the government's much vaunted apprenticeship scheme kicked off this summer to address it.

But while the rest of us wait to see how that one pans out, in Dundee Kate Pickering has taken matters into her own hands with the frankly brilliant Vanilla Ink, which has been running for one year now. It is a studio that aims to usher designers through the gateway from student to practitioner, supporting them on their way into the industry during that phase where there has traditionally been no support.

And the Vanilla Ink story is in many ways Kate's own, not least because the Ink in the name refers to her many tattoos (11 in total). After she graduated with a degree in jewellery and metalworking she then expected to start her career. It wasn't that simple. "I never anticipated just how difficult it was going to be. The support network wasn't there and the industry was a difficult one to navigate. I felt I had been given the tools to make jewellery but I wasn't given the skills to become a jeweller."

She says she felt lonely and intimidated, she lost confidence

and got snarled up in the nine to five. Jewellery became more hobby, less profession. She wondered if others felt the same.

"Turns out I wasn't alone. There were many more out there so I decided to do something about it. I had completed my Masters of Design and I felt much more confident and prepared to tackle the world of enterprise and so I began my Inky journey. In May last year I was handed the keys to Vanilla Ink. That moment marked a milestone and things snowballed from that point."

Her highlights? "Filling the programme with eight fantastically talented jewellers and watching them grow from strength to strength. In March we celebrated a hugely successful crowd-funding project, which saw us raise over £8,000 to help take our designers to this year's IJL. The support that we got from the industry, locally and internationally, was incredibly humbling."

Already Vanilla Ink is being scrutinised as a template for other industries, and Kate says she is often faced with the question: why isn't there a Vanilla Ink for textiles or graphics?

It is fair to say that one way or another, one day there will be. For now we should just feel immensely proud that in this case jewellery got there first. Thank you, Kate.

kate PICKERING
FOUNDER, VANILLA INK

