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## Higher Education Inspire the Next Generation of Designers

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### Abstract

*How higher education can inform and inspire the next generation of designers to incorporate ethics and sustainability into their future careers. Due to the rapid and volatile changes occurring in the industry, the future role of fashion designers will require the ability to perform deeper levels of research in order to support design proposals. Fashion designers will be expected to engage with previously unrelated practices to create innovative fashion design, contextualize the work, and improve industry systems. Academia is considering how to prepare graduates for this accelerated and highly unpredictable professional landscape by reimagining the future of fashion design education. Educators will increasingly focus on developing students' conceptual skills and design processes within curricula that provide greater interdisciplinary opportunities. Fashion design industry—stress the need for a balanced education that incorporates the development of conceptual thinking and practical- hands on skills.*

### 1. Introduction

The past 20 years have witnessed a gradual growth in societies awareness and concern of ethical and sustainable issues. The growing awareness can be directly related to pressure group support, media interest and increased corporate responsibility action on part of retailers (Strong, 1996). However, in order for this growth to consistently increase in the future, the next generation of key industry professionals and ultimately future decision-makers need to be provided with an educational background and awareness of the ethical and sustainable impact of their work. Educators can be integrating issues of ethics and sustainability into curricula and what work is being done to inform and inspire the next generation of future industry leaders.

- 1) Growth of interest in ethics and sustainability in higher education
- 2) The role of higher education in teaching ethics and sustainability
- 3) Are fashion educators fully informed on the issues?
- 4) Application of sustainability knowledge gained in higher education
- 5) How to inform and inspire the next generation to integrated sustainability into future Careers

#### 1.1. Growth Of Interest in Ethics And Sustainability

This growth in interest and focus has prompted reactions in many different contexts. For example, the response that the fashion industry has had in reaction to this growth has been labelled as chasing the ethical pound. However despite numerous positive schemes the ethical fashion market remains at just 1% of the overall apparel market (Niinimaki, 2010). With this in mind, change in terms future design practice in an ethical fashion context is paramount.

The key method of influencing future practice can be directly related to the current higher education system and the way that future practitioners are informed. The emphasis placed therefore on the curriculum taught to higher education students, in particular fashion design students, needs to be addressed in order to ensure this awareness growth continues.

### **1.2. The Role of Higher Education**

The range and breadth of knowledge taught in higher education fashion courses within the UK is commendable. However, the number of programmes that integrate ethics and sustainability into curricula varies enormously. This is for two key reasons. First, ethics and sustainability issues relate to and require basic knowledge of many educational areas including science, technology and design (Wals & Jickling, 2002). There is also a lack of definition for key terminology and often a misunderstanding of ethical issues (Ghassan, 2012).

The way that ethics and sustainability is integrated within fashion education can not only vary hugely but also change the impact of teaching. For example, some fashion courses have modules dedicated to ethics and sustainability, whereas some courses are entirely directed to sustainable fashion. A comparison can be drawn here to the way that retailers incorporate ethical and sustainable action into their corporate social responsibility agendas. Some retailers incorporate this action through dedicated internal and/or external concessional ranges. Other retailers do so through incorporating sustainability into their brand philosophy and the way they conduct all business. Sustainability educator, Francesca Granata (2010) believes that sustainability should lie at the core of the teaching rather than something that is simply added on in a token module. She continues that the emphasis should be on both the creative technical aspect of fashion as well as the critical re-thinking of consumers relationship with clothes.

Wals & Jickling (2002) believe that the key aim of higher education in a fashion context is to engage students in the evolving process of environmental thought and ethics and to provide a way of understanding which aims to transform the complex world of which they are a part. Other educators such as Sue Thomas (2009, p.18) believe that teaching students 'empathy' is the key to improved future practice: 'If we are to engage our students in preparing themselves to work ethically in our industry, they need to be able to personally and professionally empathise'.

### **1.3. Are Fashion Educators Fully Informed?**

Doug Miller (2012) believes that unless fashion educators have a relevant CSR or labour rights background, they do not have the insight or knowledge to apply this to their teaching methods. This raises a broader question of the adequacy of teaching support and materials within the area of ethics and sustainability in fashion design. Past initiatives such as Fashioning an Ethical Industry have supported this area of teaching materials with the aim of supporting educators with the incorporation of social responsibility issues and planning student design work that integrates sustainability.

Another factor thought to be prohibiting further educational development is the emphasis that is placed on environmental issues in preference to social aspects such as worker rights. Students tend to approach sustainability from a fabric/textile approach rather than looking further down the supply chain and at the manufacturing of their designs (Miller, 2012). Aysar Ghassan (2012), believes that design education takes two stances on ethical issues; capitalist design activity is bad and more appropriate design activity can make things better.

### **1.4. Application of Knowledge**

From a students perspective, a distinct difference of ethics and sustainability teaching from a undergraduate and postgraduate perspective. She believes that at a postgraduate level of teaching, more contemporary design issues are taken into consideration, often applying a why we design approach. When interviewing a fashion design industry professional (Anonymous, 2012)

who graduated in 2005 regarding her application of post-education knowledge in her career, she detailed receiving no ethical or sustainable teaching during her undergraduate degree. She also claimed to have a knowledge of garment supply chains but not the negative social and environmental impact of her industry designs, this is assumed to be a different role, not that of a designers.

### **1.5. The Next Generation**

When considering how fashion design education must evolve, an examination into the general characteristics of young adulthood must occur. Understanding the common attributes of college students, along with those unique to fashion design students, will ensure the future pedagogy and methods of its delivery are successfully developed for students. With ethics and sustainability gradually increasing in consumer awareness and consequently retailer action, how can the current education system keep up with these changes in agenda? Granata (2010) believes that there should come a time when fashion programmes do not need to explicate a sustainability angle, rather it would be an assumption that all courses integrate ethics and sustainability into the core of the curricula. Miller (2012) thinks that student placements in supplier factories and workforce simulations could better inform and connect students with the garment supply chain. However, something as simple as guest lecturers offering an ethics and sustainability angle may also improve students application of knowledge to their design work (Anonymous, Clarkson & Ghassan, 2012). Whatever the solution, the social and environmental implications of the garment design industry are fast becoming a priority in design education and universities need to tailor their courses accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

The future of fashion design education will required evolution in areas of pedagogy, mentorship, and student development. As shown, the philosophies for how design programs deliver academic content will change. This will require institutions to provide faculty development so they may learn new teaching methodologies, to engage with professional practice to ensure graduates are prepared successfully, and to increase mentorship opportunities to support students who will enter the increasingly volatile and uncertain professional landscape.

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