

THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABILITY TEACHING IN FASHION: a method merging practitioners and researchers

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Abstract

Sustainability is becoming a major issue in teaching and research in several industries and universities syllabus. The article is an outcome of a key element of the University of Navarra's strategy for 2025 that includes good practices through teaching in sustainability. Authors ideated a project to elaborate teaching material (that might serve as a basis for research) on sustainability in the fashion industry, with the special executive program called The Right Fashion and its students. This program enables to have an overview 360° of the different aspects that may contribute to more sustainable production, distribution, and consumption, and to tackle the main challenges. The project uses a learning-by-doing methodology that can be implemented when participants are at the same time, professionals and students. The dialogue and discussion among this kind of student are a valuable asset to improve the teaching activity and the level of the classes. This paper shows the work in progress of a project that is being carried out at ISEM Fashion Business School to create both with the students and professors teaching material about sustainability in fashion, based on practical cases, that may serve to enrich the academic conversation and the industry practices and policies. The project began with the compilation of the final works presented by the students in the edition of 2019. These works are serving as an element of discussion for the students of the edition of 2022 who, at the same time, are preparing new cases as their final programme's projects. The projects are elaborated by the students with the guide and support from their professors during the programme. The experience is the elaboration of the material co-created by professors and students, having into account the specificity of these students (most of them working on sustainability positions within the fashion industry). Therefore, learning by doing is also a useful path for improving the teaching experience. As the project is in progress, this is a developmental paper. This material could be nourished by creating a database with ideas and materials from other universities working on the same subjects. Presenting it at the IFFTI Conference may provide the opportunity to create synergies among researchers' communities.

Introduction

Teaching sustainability to fashion industry practitioners is a challenge because of the novelty and the quickness of the changes, the scarcity of academic and updated business cases, and, overall, the number and variety of subjects that need to be addressed.

At the time of writing this paper, Harvard Business Publishing offered 1,565 cases related to sustainability, from which only 24 referred to fashion companies. Even recent publications about fashion business cases (Burns et al., 2021), dedicated 7 out of 43 cases to sustainability. Although this material available offers good possibilities, a lot of topics are not covered: health and safety of products, reputation, risks and crisis in upstream factories, extended producer's responsibility, etc.

The universities are preparing new professional profiles for the fashion industry and the learning process has to be managed according to these new challenges (Marques and Moschatou, 2017:1). Some experiences of generating bonds between companies and academia have been applied until now with good results. Lutenberg (2020) offered to his master's students to develop proposals from SMEs as their final project, while interacting with the companies, and it proved to be beneficial for both SMEs and students; although it was not referred to the fashion industry but to SMEs looking for electronic engineers.

Learning by doing involves self-experiences, acquiring independent learning skills and practices (Noorkartina et al., 2015), and exposure to the business environment makes students more confident about their own abilities of becoming entrepreneurs (Linan et al., 2011).

The fashion industry is facing the challenges that sustainability arises involving multidisciplinary teams, as well as managers trained with a broad scope. Sustainability was, after digitalisation, what fashion executives most cited in 2021 as an area of growth (BoF, 2021) and what would allow companies to turn potential financial, social or environmental risks into opportunities Arici & Lehmann, 2020).

This developmental paper aims to share the project that is being developed at ISEM Fashion Business School to co-create teaching materials to train practitioners for a more sustainable and responsible fashion. The material is prepared as case studies, as they are a powerful tool to learn and apply concepts introduced in courses to real-life situations and dilemmas faced by professionals and companies (Burns et al., 2021:4). To share it with other academics in this initial phase allows the project to be improved with the comments and feedback from them.

Project Justification

a. Scope of the project:

The Right Fashion Programme at ISEM Fashion Business School offers its Degree of the University of Navarra, entitled "Expert in Sustainability in Fashion Companies", consisting of fifteen ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, where each ECTS credit is equivalent to 25 working hours).

This programme is the result of many discussions with professionals of the fashion business (having occupied Sustainability Manager positions), academics (with diverse backgrounds coming from different universities), manufacturers and providers, from July 2017 on. It can be defined as a programme offering a 360° overview of the sustainability challenges, upstream and downstream the value chain in the fashion industry.

This program has already been offered during three academic years with an excellent reception among professionals in the sector. Thirty students have followed it in past editions, and fifteen are following in 2022. The time to make a qualitative leap and start preparing teaching material (that might be used as a research base) has come. This teaching material is aimed not only for the students of the programme but for the rest of the academic community and to be transferred directly to the business tissue.

a. Description of the situation to be improved:

This programme is aimed to train professionals from fashion companies directly concerned with sustainability at the level of management, design, operations, purchasing, etc.

In the first edition, students were asked to develop a project based on a real case, applying the concepts learned during the course. As a result, ten case studies were presented with solutions to real problems that occurred in their companies or others. To name just a few: how to resolve the crisis caused by the fire at a supplier factory in Bangladesh; how to handle the complaint of a customer who has received an online order with clothes with bloodstains; which was the reputational impact on fashion brands after the collapse of Rana Plaza building in 2013; what to do when jeans have produced permanent blue stains on a child's knees, etc. In the second edition of the program, due to agenda issues, this type of presentation was not planned. The students of the third edition of the programme in 2022 are working on individual or groups projects in which apply the knowledge acquired, as a relevant element of the process of training.

The approach of The Right Fashion program (addressing sustainability from scientific parameters -including experimental, social and ethical sciences- and with a 360° vision), and the participation of professionals of the fashion industry as students, provide an exceptional opportunity to develop training material, among teachers and students, which can serve as a basis for future courses and to influence the academic and general conversation on the subject, which sometimes lacks depth or has biased approaches.

b. Proposed measures:

The first step is to make a compilation of the projects presented at the first edition of the Right Fashion, with the consent of their authors and the necessary adaptations (e.g., see if they allow their brands to appear or not, if there is confidentiality, etc.). This work of collecting previous projects from 2019 is parallel to the one that the students in 2022 are doing: they started in January to elaborate individual or group projects on sustainability, tackling their concerns or aspirations, under the guidance of a professor from the program. The idea is to build on the

creation of original and updated material, to be published as a manual, or to constitute a repository of cases, etc., working together students (professionals of the fashion industry) and professors.

This means foreseeing dedication on the part of some professors to the direction of these works and a later task of selecting and editing them in a meaningful context.

c. Objectives and measurable results expected

The objectives are to prepare at least twenty cases on sustainability among the projects presented by the students in 2019 and those that will be presented in June 2022. The first edition will be prepared during the second semester of 2022. A first trial of the cases presented in 2019 will be done with the students taking the programme in 2022, to check if they are practical, complete, etc., or they need improvements. The same process will follow the material prepared during 2022: it will be used with the students of the Right Fashion Programme in 2023, in order to test the material and to add further enhancements.

How Will the Achievement of the Project Objectives be Measured?

The proposed objectives are easy to measure because they consist of the elaboration of teaching and learning material. The usefulness of having this material could be measured with a focus group with the students of the 2022 edition at the middle of the program (in March, after having used the cases of 2019), and with a satisfaction survey at the end (once they have also written their own cases in June 2022). During the 2023 academic year, once prepared the material and made it available to the upcoming students for that edition, the usefulness of the same could be measured with the students of that edition, using it as teaching material.

Means and Tools to Implement and Develop the Project

Dedication time is required both from the project director to compile previous material of 2019 and from the professors to guide and direct new projects in 2022. There is also the need to ensure that new student's projects cover different aspects related to current sustainability challenges. The material would be published digitally for students and an attempt would be made to disseminate it academically, through articles in journals or communications at conferences.

Temporary Planning

To describe the phases and establish the chronogram of the project, we need the continuity of the Right Fashion programme during some academic courses:

Phase 1: Collection of the projects developed in 2019 and consultation with the internal department of our university on Quality and Innovation regarding intellectual property issues, permissions, etc. To use these materials in the preliminary edition with the students taking the Programme in 2022 (January 2022 – July 2022).

Phase 2: Right Fashion 2022 students start their projects, with the guide of their mentors during the programme (January 2022 - June 2022).

Phase 3: Presentations of the final projects of the students 2022 (June 2022).

Phase 4: First edition of the projects complied during these programmes and preparation of the material for its dissemination (July - December 2022).

Discussion

This material result of the collaboration of fashion professionals (designers, buyers, managers, etc.), and professors in the context of The Right Fashion Programme, aims to be useful for teaching sustainability in High Education and longlife learning. As the students (professionals) choose real challenges and problems they need to face to in their current works, the cases they may write with the professors will be updated material to enrich the process of learning and teaching. This material could be enlarged with the collaboration of other universities well connected with fashion companies.

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