

## **TEACHING FASHION WITH THE CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY: COMPARISON BETWEEN SPAIN AND CANADA**

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### **Abstract**

Case studies in the fashion industry can be a method to introduce students to real issues of fashion companies. Case studies are especially valuable as they provide the opportunity to describe the events surrounding a specific situation in an in-depth manner (Yin, 2011).

The goal of this paper is to analyse the practice of fashion case studies across time and countries, to establish learnings and improvements in this teaching methodology.

First, we establish that case studies involve a triangular work in the world of fashion between companies, students, and schools. To organise such a three-way relationship, a precise timeline is needed, as well as a neat role distribution.

Thus, with a sample of 118 cases in Spain since 2004, seven locally written in Canada, sustainability and entrepreneurially focused cases, this paper analyzes: (a) the process and timeline to create a good case study; (b) leadership and roles of different key players in the case study; and (c) topics and interest evolution. The comparative work between academic institutions in Spain and Canada allows us to get clearer and general conclusions, beyond the specific experience.

With the results of the analysis, we can go deeper into the triangle relationship. For the fashion students, confirming this method as a bridge to learning about the industry; for the academia, not just having some orientation about how to approach a case study but also a better understanding of the needs and pains of the industry; and for fashion companies to check trends and knowledge from their peers. The evolution of the different topics and the varied approaches in the cases studied across this period of time shows the connection between the past and present, allows us to learn from the past and from the real situations in the industry, and helps envision paths for the future.

## **Introduction**

Business Schools are focused on providing students with the skills and knowledge to be able to manage business organisations and make decisions by analysing situations, evaluating alternatives and assessing the effectiveness of those decisions.

One of the most common methods of teaching in Business Schools are case studies and their use in the classroom has been on the rise over the past few decades (Yin, 2017, p. xvi). The case study method of teaching and learning is a powerful tool for students to apply theoretical course concepts to real-life situations, dilemmas, or opportunities faced by professionals and companies (Davis Burns, 2021).

Although case studies in different sectors may serve for teaching specific disciplines (general management, ethics, accounting, strategy, entrepreneurship, and so on) in all industries, the closer the sector is to the area of expertise of the students, the easier for them to be engaged with the case. Fashion management students are especially interested in facing—during their learning period—real situations that occurred in the industry, to acquire specific knowledge and skills that may serve for their future professional life.

The fashion industry has not been, until recently, considered by the academy as a field of research (Calia, 2021; Kawamura, 2011). This explains why it is difficult to find cases addressing the specific issues faced by fashion companies' managers. This motivated two different Business Schools (ISEM in Spain and Humber College in Canada) to start using and writing fashion case studies as means to improve the teaching and learning processes in their fashion postgraduate programs.

ISEM Fashion Business School is the first business school specialising in the fashion business that exists in Spain since 2001. It was born with the aim of training professionals with negotiation and leadership skills to work in the fashion industry. Its vocation is to professionalise the sector being a centre of convergence between management and creativity. ISEM offers currently eight programmes per year with the Executive Master Fashion Business Administration being the most relevant. Throughout these years, ISEM has achieved a unique balance between specialised knowledge and practical experience, enhancing the dimension and richness in the professional development of those who promote, from relevant positions, the future of the fashion sector.

Humber College, founded in 1967, is one of the largest public College of Applied Arts and Technology in Toronto, Canada. It offers more than 220 programs, including bachelor's degree, diploma, certificate, post-graduate certificate and apprenticeship programs, across 40 fields of study. Humber serves over 86,000 learners. The Fashion Innovation and Sustainability postgraduate certificate, where the cases have been conceived and taught, has been offered since 2019.

ISEM started to co-create cases with their students in 2004, developing an average of seven per year. Humber College started to prepare cases in 2019 with seven cases so far. Although the selection of the fashion companies, the approach, and the process are different at ISEM and Humber, the learning journey of the students and the collaboration between industry and academia are quite similar.

The goal of this research is to analyse the development of this practice in both business schools, and the results for the different stakeholders participating in the creation of the cases: industry, academia, and students. In doing so, other aspects arise: the evolution of the different topics and the varied approaches in the cases studied across this period of time show the connection between the past and present, allowing us to learn from the past and from the real situations in the industry. It is also an evidence of how the academy is leading and being one step ahead of industry challenges thus able to offer paths for a better fashion future.

### **Literature review**

We live in times of intensifying changes in a context full of disruptions, uncertainty and interdependence (Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), 2007), where our graduates are expected to work on interdisciplinary projects in companies surrounded by complexity (AACU, 2010).

One approach for educators to prepare students for such a complex industry landscape is to use pedagogies in the classroom that reflect real world complexities and offer authentic and interactive experiences in collaborative settings. Business cases have long been regarded as a very effective tool in higher education (Barnes et al., 1994). Their use in the classroom allows students to develop in-depth understanding (Stake, 1995) and appreciation of complex, real-life phenomena in contemporary settings (Yin, 2009, Crowe et al., 2011, Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Students gain opportunities for discussions over multifaceted dilemmas thus improving “cognitive skills, personal insights and imagination” (Maclagan, 2003). Live case studies take those advantages one step further by bringing direct interaction with business organisations into the classroom and presenting industry challenges as real time, dynamic solutions requiring cross-disciplinary approaches and knowledge applications (Daly, 2017). Therefore, Live Case Studies immerse students in a problem based experiential learning where they acquire industry knowledge and hone organisational, interdisciplinary teamwork, planning, and strategic thinking skills (Dickinson, 2000). The extended analysis and problem-solving approach is possible due to a mutual agreement between the student/faculty member and the client/organisation (Roth and Smith, 2009).

Business cases need to be understood within the context of a particular disciplinary tradition for our purpose that is the fashion industry (Piekkari et al., 2009), therefore our focus on fashion cases. Furthermore, in order to offer students full appreciation of the temporal state of fashion with its variety of issues, both Humber and ISEM have developed and used in the classroom a sequence of instrumental collective cases (Stake, 1995). All cases rely on the positivistic approach of Yin (2004) with applied objective for consulting versus theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Both ISEM and Humber students play the role of consultants interacting with real complex situations and providing solutions to the organisation gaining a whole system perspective and exhibiting cooperative behavior (Daly, 2017).

With its business realism and strong experiential aspect, live case studies involve students through emotional and behavioral components (Daly, 2017) in contrast to the “impersonal and sterile analysis” (Markulis, 1985) of traditional case studies. Students are also given opportunities to take control of their own learning (Gallucci, 2006) and develop awareness and knowledge, critical thinking, and accountability for their decisions while maintaining engagement (McWilliams and Nahavandi, 2006).

A key aspect of ISEM and Humber case study preparation is topic selection with the starting point grounded in students' background knowledge and interests, institutional (university and college) mission and company background information (Johnson and Helms, 2008). Currently, in the fashion industry, there are many case studies focussed on internationally listed brands with thousands of employees and high revenues (Nike, Inditex, Kering, LVMH, Uniqlo, and so on). However, it is difficult to find cases of successful fashion entrepreneurs, medium-sized companies, local or national brands, and so on. This is in contrast to the fact that most of the fashion companies are small-medium enterprise (SME) businesses. Both in Europe and Canada, small and medium sized companies are the most prevalent with 99 per cent of the companies being such in Europe (European Commission, 2020) and 98.1 per cent in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Locality is also another characteristic of both institutional cases. Both ISEM and Humber wanted to represent that in the classroom material and, therefore, local companies (big and SME) were their main target choice. The use of a local company as a “living laboratory” enhances students' competencies while maintaining students' interest. While working on local rather than textbook cases, students perceive better the issues facing the industry and the organisation (Johnson and Helms, 2008).

For companies' selection, ISEM and Humber followed different approaches. At ISEM, the process was top-bottom driven: the companies proposed the specific problems they wanted to solve through the case (as a consultancy project). At Humber College, the process was bottom-top driven: Humber faculty made the company case selection with the main objective to inspire students for change by exposing them to current fashion sustainability challenges of local, diverse and inclusive entrepreneurial organisations. In both educational institutions, the case studies were “hospitable to inquiry” (Crowe et al., 2011) and have developed more than five replications, a requirement when dealing with intertwined and complex issues (Yin, 2009).

Case design and case boundary setting is the defining logic of the case study research approach (Yin, 2004). Humber cases are anchored in the sustainable fashion literature, use sustainability practising organisations and entrepreneurs as units of analysis, and seek to involve diverse participants (Eisenhardt, 1989) from underrepresented groups. Using the “backward design” approach (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) which offers effective ways to reinforce curriculum concepts (Johnson and Helms, 2008), Humber College explicitly uses its institutional and fashion programme sustainability, diversity and inclusion learning outcomes as a guiding

principle (Gallucci, 2006). ISEM, a little differently, covers a wide variety of topics, according to the calls and needs of the companies.

Both institutional cases possess two overarching characteristics: locality and emotionality. Johnson and Helms (2008) found that students prefer working on local cases rather than textbook cases and thus perceive better the issues facing the industry and the organisation. They argued that the use of a local company as a “living laboratory” enhances students' competencies while maintaining students' interest. The emotionality aspect and the introduction of strong non-financial and aspirational goals (Giacalone, 2004) was specifically emphasized at Humber with the selection of business organisations run by Humber alumni, from diverse and inclusive background, with the objective to inspire and motivate its students to follow alumni footsteps and strive for a better sustainable future.

## **Methodology**

To analyse the case studies, we have performed a double methodology with a qualitative and a quantitative analysis. This methodology allows us to enrich the discussion and conclusions, as we see the data from different perspectives. Also, it gives us arguments for future work in the case study as a learning process for students.

First, a qualitative approach to the Spanish and Canadian approaches to the case studies elaboration implemented in the fashion courses. In the Spanish case, data are collected from ISEM Fashion Business School projects, from the academic years 2004-2005 to 2020-2021, with a total of 116 projects. In the Canadian case, data comes from Humber College since 2019, with a total of seven projects. This school is starting to work with the case study methodology and although the number of cases is not equivalent to ISEM's for making a statistical comparison, learnings can be taken as well. An important difference is that all Humber cases are formally written following the Bloomsbury Fashion case framework with two of Humber cases already published.

Second, a quantitative methodology, as we take the list of case studies and through the STATA IC/15.1 program, we explore the number, topics and evolution of case studies with a univariate analysis of frequencies and bivariate analysis of frequencies and years. Last, we discuss the results, highlighting the roles of each of the actors involved in the processes, and comparing the outcomes of both approaches.

## **Findings and analysis**

### ***Qualitative Discussion***

ISEM has created an ecosystem among fashion companies, master's students, and academia, to provide a range of case studies tackling relevant aspects of the industry.

The case generation process starts with the ‘Call for Consultancy’ from the academic institution (ISEM) to the selected companies. The companies ask ISEM for consultancy because they appreciate the added value from three perspectives: they are looking for a young point of view

of the problems (executive masters' students are on average 26 years old), they want a solution and they do not have time or resources to find it, and they want to build bonding with the academic institution based on trust and growing relationship.

There are two different ranges of **criteria** to choose the companies to study: quantitative and qualitative. Eighty percent of the companies are chosen according to quantitative criteria: turnover of at least 10 million Euro, a minimum of 50-100 employees, and brands with big awareness in society. The 20 per cent left is selected according to qualitative criteria: high implication management team (from the owner and/or the manager), high motivation for the case, high implication, and high reward (these companies usually offer the students some positions or internships once they have finished their consultancy project). Most of the companies are Spanish brands or fashion groups. A small percentage of the cases come from internationally expanded brands or groups whose headquarters are located in other countries but bring specific topics that complement the content for the fashion students (cosmetics, fur, watches, and so on).

The outcomes usually follow the same patterns: small companies usually propose high cases (oriented to business growth or strategy), while big companies tend to offer medium cases (an area of the business). It follows a top-bottom pattern, as the companies propose the topics to the academia and the students.

### ***Process***

The academic institution encourages the company to think of some problem areas and launch a briefing, based on a template developed by ISEM. At the same time, ISEM asks a team of experts to help monitor and provide advice to the students. The students are organised in groups of about seven to eight people.

According to the problem situation and the company profile, the coordinator from ISEM (a professor) allocates one mentor with field experience to each project to guide and accompany the group of students during the whole project.

The criterion to select the tutor or mentor is based on their experience in the sector, area or topic. They can be part of the ISEM Faculty network (those speakers, professors or researchers who have collaborated with classes in the last 20 years), or the ISEM Alumni network (former students of ISEM's programs working in positions in the fashion sector).

The projects are randomly assigned to the students' groups. The professor introduces all the projects and the mentors' profiles during the class, and one by one, each group receives their project brief. In previous classes, the professor has provided the students with knowledge and practices about project management and has also had some meetings with the mentors, in order to encourage them to manage time and scheduling, offer a strategic view, provide collapse relief to the students during the process, and bring always inspiring solutions.

From the fashion company, there is a designated team to facilitate information and the company DNA to the students during the whole process, committed to at least four checkpoints with the students and their mentor.

### *Methodology of the case study*

The preparation of the case study takes an eight-to-twelve weeks' period in the first term of the academic course. There is a midterm checkpoint with the professor and some milestones with the mentors. It is a 6ECTS course involving around 480 hours of work for each project.

The professor acts as a leader of mentors or “leader of the leaders”: they have biweekly meetings to share experiences, unlock processes, cooperate, and provide virtuous solutions with feedback among them.

Each group of students prepares a proposal for their company, following the brief. After validating the problematic aspects with the company, they do an in-depth external analysis of the market (competition, best practices, benchmarking, and so on), an internal analysis of the company, the goals definition and the action plan. They prepare a dossier, with an executive summary, that is sent to the professor and the company. Days later, they defend the process of the case study in an oral and public presentation before all the companies, the mentors, the professors and their classmates. There is a sort of role-play in which the members of the company ask and question, acting as clients, and the students act as consultants. There is a gamification assessment jury. Sometimes, the students have been asked by the companies to present their projects before the board of directors of the company some weeks later.

The assessment system is the result of weighing the remarks of the tutor of the company, the mentor of the groups and the professor of the course.

The outcome, the case study, is a valuable working document for the company: useful, realistic, implementable, and an eye-opener: usually, the students bring disruptive thinking, ambitious goals, and the asset of the intergenerational point of view.

Humber used, as a starting point for case writing and development, the institutional push for sustainability, inclusivity and diversity (Humber Learning Outcomes). With that in mind, Humber started to search through its local alumni and faculty network for alumni entrepreneurial organisations that fulfill the criteria of fashion sustainability, diversity and inclusion.

By bringing the local heroes into the classroom, the Humber faculty aim to transform the fashion business education in the programme curriculum (Longmore et al., 2017) using the power of emotionality and locality. Since the programme and the course's main learning outcomes were related to sustainable fashion, all cases are connected with sustainability from different fashion industry aspects—local manufacturing, home lifestyle and decor, fashion design, sustainable denim manufacturing, streetwear, jewelry, bespoke fashion.

It takes three to four months for Humber to collect information through research of open public sources plus semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs and to write-up the actual case study. Cases are taught subsequently in the fashion sustainability programme during a 14-week long course. The entire duration of writing and teaching the case takes approximately between 250 hours. Students work in groups on the case with each group being assigned a mentor and meet twice with the company for questions and answers sessions. Students are given training on systems thinking and mentored throughout the project to incorporate systems thinking into their work and design thinking into the final solution. Groups present their final solution and report to a panel of industry people and the company.

In the majority of the case studies, students worked in interdisciplinary, international teams with Humber partner institutions from United Kingdom and Brazil. In those situations, students were, in addition to systems design thinking, doing intercultural training before, mid- and post project. Final assessment is done following input by the entrepreneur, the mentor and the professor of the course as with ISEM.

The outcome is a prototype and report to the company that sums up knowledge, brave ideas and similarly to ISEM helps the industry with new perspectives.

### *Quantitative discussion*

Starting from 2004-2005, there have always been case studies (consultancy projects) at ISEM Fashion Business School. In those 18 years, with a total of 116 projects, the average and median are 6 projects per year, although one year there were 8 and another one just 5, as shown in Table 1. This gives an idea of a very established program. In the recent initiative at Humber, we find 4 and 3 cases in both years.

<i>Year</i>	<b>ISEM</b>			<b>Humber</b>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage of Total</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage</i>	
2004-2005	6	5.17	5.17	
2005-2006	5	4.31	9.48	
2006-2007	7	6.03	15.52	
2007-2008	7	6.03	21.55	
2008-2009	8	6.90	28.45	
2009-2010	7	6.03	34.48	
2010-2011	7	6.03	40.52	
2011-2012	7	6.03	46.55	
2012-2013	6	5.17	51.72	
2013-2014	6	5.17	56.90	
2014-2015	6	5.17	62.07	
2015-2016	6	5.17	67.24	
2016-2017	6	5.17	72.41	
2017-2018	6	5.17	77.59	
2018-2019	6	5.17	82.76	
2019-2020	6	5.17	87.93	
2020-2021	7	6.03	93.97	4
2021-2022	7	6.03	100.00	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>		<b>100.00</b>	<b>7</b>

Table 1. Number of projects per year ISEM and Humber



If we explore the topics that ISEM case studies analysed (Figure 1), we can conclude that communication and marketing issues are the most relevant (together, more than 40 per cent of the projects), followed by the general strategy of the company (14 per cent) and internationalisation (13 per cent). This shows the importance many companies give to the communication and marketing dimensions, or it could also be interpreted as the areas where they have more doubts, and need the external help of students.

In the case of Humber, the variety in the sample is bigger as there is one project related to consumer issues, another one about sustainability, the third one on marketing, then two related to product development and another one about e-commerce. All these topics are also in the ISEM sample except the product development approach. This is due to the case design aspect: Humber wanted each case to represent a current challenge in the local fashion industry.

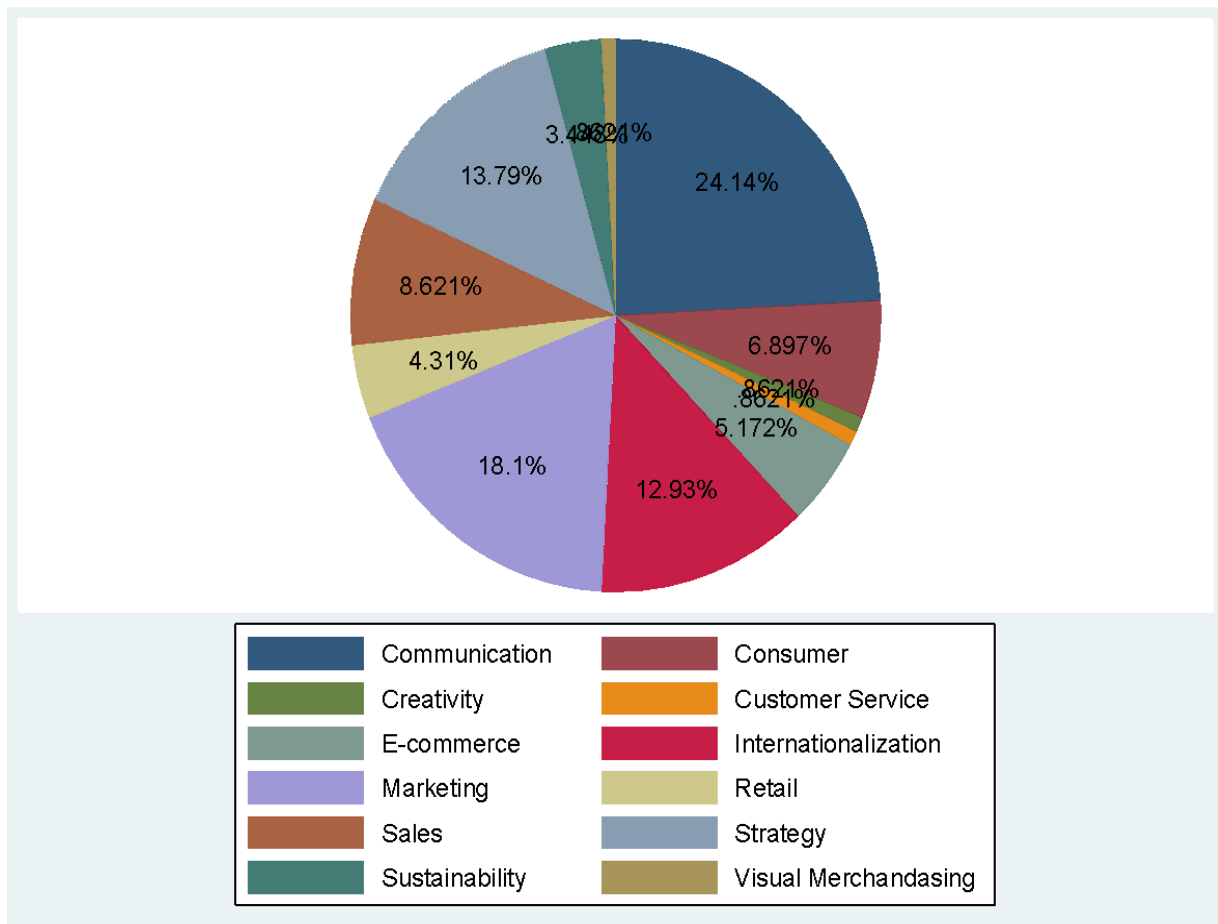


Figure 1. Most frequent topics

Finally, we wanted to check if there has been any evolution of topics over the years. We only tracked this evolution in the ISEM sample, as we have 18 years of possible trends. As Table 2 shows, the importance of topics has evolved in a discontinuous way, but in all years except the academic year 2015/16, we can find at least one of the case studies on communication and marketing. It is also remarkable that two years ago, five projects out of seven were on communication issues. The year 2013/14 was very important for internationalisation, as many Spanish companies were trying to diversify their markets because of the economic crisis.

Retail topics have experienced two waves of interest, the last one in the three last years when there has always been one project about retail issues. Clearly, e-commerce is not a concern anymore for the companies, as since 2015/16 there are no more projects on e-commerce. On the other side, since that year we can see an interest in projects related to sales. Another interesting thing is that sustainability is not being considered the protagonist one could think about.

Year	Comm	Mark	Strat	Intern	Sales	Cons	E-com	Retail	Sust	Create	Custom	Visual	Total
2004-2005	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	6
2005-2006	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
2006-2007	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
2007-2008	1	2	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	7
2008-2009	2	1	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	8
2009-2010	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	7
2010-2011	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	7
2011-2012	1	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
2012-2013	1	0	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
2013-2014	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
2014-2015	0	3	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	6
2015-2016	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
2016-2017	0	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
2017-2018	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	6
2018-2019	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	6
2019-2020	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	6
2020-2021	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	7
2021-2022	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>116</b>

Table 2. Evolution of topics over the years

### Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this paper is to analyse the practice of fashion case studies across time and countries, to establish learnings and improvements in this teaching methodology. After the quantitative and qualitative study of cases, both in Humber and ISEM, there are some interesting points to consider.

Supporting the reviewed literature on case studies, the analysis shows how live case study can be an opportunity to unite academia, students and industry for a common goal. For all of them it is (a) a learning experience; (b) a cooperative work where new relationships are established; and (c) a better understanding of the real situation of fashion. Then, and going a step further on the previous literature, we can say that this process gives not just learning benefits for the students, but also for all stakeholders (industry, faculty and students) involved in the process.

Both schools dealt with live case studies, with some differences and similarities, but both achieved the same goal. This means that there is no specific way to implement this approach, but what is more relevant is (a) the involvement of the three stakeholders (faculty/mentors, students and industry); (b) the selection of a relevant topic; and (c) the planning of timing and delivery.

In regards to topic selection and criteria, we have explored how in both schools the process starts in different ways: top-bottom vs bottom-up. In the top-bottom model, companies are the ones determining one subject of interest. The hypothesis in this case was that the evolution of topics could be a perfect mirror of the evolution of the industry over the years. A good example in this sense is sustainability as a new topic. New challenges and opportunities in fashion should be reflected in the list of topics. However, the analysis of topics proposed by the industry shows that this is not happening. Maybe it is just that companies perceive that students are not prepared to give solutions on these complex situations, or possibly it is that companies are not still aware about the relevance of the new topic. It is very interesting to see how the bottom-up process, on the other hand, presents the topic of sustainability, diversity and locality (in terms of local heroes) as a leading paradigm, meaning that academia is observing and taking the leadership. This idea requires further research but could change the established thinking about academia being behind the reality, the so-called gap between academia and industry.

In support of the literature review, both ISEM and Humber cases show how the use of local companies and local entrepreneurs are better cases to engage students critically, creatively and emotionally. Inspiring students to think big, imagine and create a better industry of tomorrow and be the change they want to see is the best result and reward of both approaches.

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