

FASHION LANDSCAPE: TAKING A GOOD IMAGE IS A BUSINESS DECISION

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ABSTRACT

Future generations need to be prepared for jobs, which in many cases, do not exist yet, when they initially enrol onto their adult education journey. As educators, we have a responsibility to evolve our curriculum to ensure future generations of fashion graduates are multifaceted, well-rounded, confident when embarking on a career.

Our ethos is to focus on student development so that they are prepared for change and can adapt in times of uncertainty. This includes a strong understanding of the industry, rather than focussing on one niche area - Niche is nice, however the fashion industry our students are entering, is rarely perceived as this.

This paper focuses on the 'Contingency Plan' – this being the ability to adapt and react when pivotal changes occur. Providing frameworks that support expanded thinking will enable students to enter the industry in a fluid and flexible manner. Students need to be exposed to theories that are transferable across all areas of the industry and acknowledge the interwoven links. Subsequently this will optimise student learning in a variety of areas, encouraging collaboration and shaping the future of fashion.

Using the universal task of producing an image of a product as an example, we recognise this is no longer an isolated aesthetic. It is a business decision which is integral to all aspects of a company's stakeholders. It can no longer be isolated to the 'design' team, and everyone needs to understand the sensitivity value of the image as a business asset.

Referring to the Iceberg theory where only 10% is surface value; one image has responsibility of speaking on behalf of the brand in its entirety. The 90% is therefore, communicating different messages from different departments, with the intention of amalgamating into a business profit.

Graduates that have this panoramic knowledge viewpoint are desirable because of their pivotal potential.

This study's primary objective is to investigate potential for cross pollination throughout the fashion programme suite within the department. This would capitalise on the broad range of staff academic and industry knowledge at disposal by mapping commonalities already being taught and provide discipline perspectives to be discussed and

debated in one forum. The aim being to propose an innovative approach to the curriculum which introduces the students to the necessity of working with other disciplines.

This research would be achieved through focus groups with students, alumni and industry experts and this paper reflects on a case study of one aspect 'an image' used to illustrate the intention.

INTRODUCTION

It has always been the nature of the fashion industry to evolve and adapt, and this ability has been particularly beneficial during this unprecedented time of rapid change which we now find ourselves living in. As the industry responds to new demands and expectations, a ricochet of this has been the necessity to create new jobs roles to meet and satisfy a new desired criterion of skills.

Such fast paced evolution demonstrates the lack of predictability regarding the requirements of the graduating students of today. Employers can no longer be specific and therefore the industry is expecting multi-faceted graduates who can adapt to rapid changes.

Fashion companies large and small, local and worldwide have ever increasing competitors and financial constraints flexing their needs and requirements of graduates.

This in turn dictates a student's education journey can no longer be a prescribed bundle of skills aimed specifically at one intended job role and as educators we have the responsibility to provide an opportunity to facilitate a skill set that is flexible and transferable.

Trought (2012) discusses this necessity by suggesting 'The changes in the higher education sector will continually increase the importance of employability not only for students but will also place the onus on universities to ensure they are producing graduates who can 'hit the ground running'. (Trought, 2012:125). Elaborating on this concept he suggests 'A degree allows you to enter the arena, but it is a students' ability to develop employability skills that will differentiate them from the competition and help secure a graduate position'.

Scientists, teachers, and methodologists world-wide are working to improve the process of obtaining and absorbing information and then transferring this knowledge to the student. (Gurevych & Kademiya, 2017). It is our responsibility as educators, to review, disseminate, and present the information available to ensure that the student develops their understanding and knowledge of the fashion industry. These skills and learning are crucial to enable the student to develop their academic understanding, building knowledge and equipping them with industry prevalent employability skills.

Kolb (2014) however, produced a learning model that suggests there are further steps necessary to close the cycle, advising that once a student can experience, reflect, conceptualise, and test, then a greater understanding is developed. To enable this to happen and to broaden student knowledge, it is important as educators that we ensure the students of today are the industry leaders of the future.

This paper opens the discussion for the necessity of the increase of blended learning, that which is not always cohort specific, allows students to gain a broader insight, allowing innovative approaches to the global fashion industry. Therefore, to teach the diverse factors in this fluid and developing global economy, the curriculum requires theoretical underpinning and practical application. Adapting to the future of fashion employment requires innovation, whilst maintaining well rounded, contemporary knowledge that influences educational development.

1.1 AIMS OF STUDY

The aim of the study is to explore the potential for cross pollination and blended learning throughout the fashion programme suite within the department. Creating a framework that can be readily applied and interpreted across a variety of Programmes within the Fashion school.

1.1.1 To enhance and further develop students' employability skills.

1.1.2 To investigate the viability of a model that can be applied across the fashion school to encourage cross pollination of disciplines.

1.1.3 To identify relevant curriculum content in the shape of a transferable tool kit

1.2. RATIONALE

The rationale is to investigate the viability of a tool kit of skills which increases blended learning across all programmes within the department. In addition to exploring the literature in this area, it is also important to celebrate the diverse knowledge base within a fashion department and encourage collaborative teaching and learning.

The focus and intention of the blended framework is to prepare the students for the increased changes in industry practice ensuring that students are and flexible for the rapid evolution of the required knowledge and skills relevant to industry employment.

This allows graduates to fully appreciate an array of industry practices whilst developing a personal skill set without any constraints and to push the boundaries of their learning and in turn realise their own potential.

1.3. DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

MFI (Manchester Fashion Institute), sits within Arts and Humanities a faculty within Manchester Metropolitan University. MFI offers a suite of programmes that are designed to address the specific learning requirements that prepare a student for an identified area of employment within the fashion industry.

Industry practice through guest lectures, conferences, study trips and collaborative projects is embedded throughout the curriculum. In many cases, the required portfolio of knowledge is already available within the teaching team due to a plethora of firsthand experience in industry throughout the staff alongside associate lecturers who are often active in the fashion industry. Cross teaching could prove beneficial for colleagues' knowledge transfer, building bridges and complementary themes.

An innovative approach to curriculum design is vital for a department to remain leaders within a hugely competitive placement and graduate market. As a result of the fashion industry's constantly changing fortunes due to the temperamental climate of fashion trends over recent years has changed the nature of graduate opportunities significantly. Post pandemic financial difficulties due to inflation and the cost-of-living crisis is diminishing consumer spending BOF and McKinsey State of Fashion Report 2023. Student competence and knowledge by exposing them to an array of skills prior to seeking a role within the industry is therefore crucial and enables students to have a prepared and realistic understanding of changes in industry practice, the challenges, expectations and managing change in a constant evolving industry environment. As discussed, recent years has seen a significant shift within the industry role requirements and the emerging theme indicates that employers are selecting students based on their ability to adapt quickly and employ transferable skills across roles and departments. The industry perspective, demonstrated through job role descriptions indicates that it is imperative that students are prepared for such demands. Meeting the wide ranging and nuanced expectations of multi faced job roles is a task students are presented and to provide experiential evidence.

Working collaboratively across programme provides the students not only with an opportunity to broaden their knowledge and opinions but provides an opportunity to actively foster relationships with their peers and lecturers on a wider scale across the department.

The initiation of this framework has been developed to accommodate the needs of the students and the constant changing and evolving fashion industry. The concept will employ pivotal points within the curriculum where units, strategic partners or organisations can collaborate and/or evaluate to improve and work together. This in time, will enable the students to adapt this approach within the industry and allow opportunities clear and broader steps of career progression.

1.4 UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENTS.

The generation of students currently being taught within the department are Generation Z (born 1995-2010) and understanding the characteristics regarding how this cohort learns and responds to information and feedback is essential. Acknowledging this understanding enables us to reflect and review our teaching methods and structure the newly proposed framework in a manner which is aligned with the values and learning styles of these new learners, Generation Z. McCrindle (2016) discusses the identified characteristics of these learners based on economic conditions, cultural norms, technological advances, and world events that influences and mould the thoughts and views of each generation. As products of an evolving society, it is essential; that us as educators ensure our teaching, reflects the needs of the changing face of our student's diversity. Higa (2016) identifies three main characteristics of Generation Z, these being:

1. A shortened attention span due to the accessibility of information.
2. Increased development of visual cognitive functions due to the internet, video games, social media.
3. Easy access to information creates an expectation of instant results and constant feedback.

Although, at first glance these could appear to be negative, in a fast pace, evolving industry, they have the potential to be interpreted as excellent coping mechanisms and fast reflexes.

The structure of our cohort mainly aligns to 'first generation' students (MMU 2024) which is synonymous with experiencing how many of our MFI students balance work whilst studying for their qualification. Allowing students first hand work experience in brands they may aspire to work for as a graduate. Through the various guises of retail providing local, mainly retail, employment students gain understanding, prior to graduating, of how certain brand framework, systems, processes and cultures work. This knowledge and understanding provides the students with practical complementary skills and often retail provides companies with a pool of talent for progression once studies are complete. Tapestry, amongst many multi-faceted companies have adopted a successful internship programme where staff from the retail side transfer into their corporate side, knowing the culture, framework and the brands customer provides 'a successful talent bridge'.

FUTURE DISCUSSION

As academics there is always an opportunity to develop the curriculum. Through consultation it is the intention to pilot and define a new framework to support graduates entering these evolving demands from the fashion industry. Curriculum redesign is key to remain contemporary and competitive within the search for graduate roles and it is therefore crucial that students have a transferable portfolio of skills which enable them to adapt and respond instinctively.

The ethos of blended learning will provide structure to support and reflect the fashion industry. Students will actively

be exposed to a variety of transferable subjects and encouraged to experiment with innovative approaches which would help to drive the industry forward. By facilitating this opportunity in a supported network of the university current students and graduates can develop skills to equip them for their future.

The fashion industry will continue to develop and expand with new and evolving job roles. Our graduates will be instrumental in this process, as such, it is essential that they are guided and supported throughout academia, ensuring their knowledge has strong foundations of varied learning and teaching. The skills gained throughout their time at university will underpin future practice, making this generation of students more desirable to employees. These collaborative partnerships with peers and programmes will strengthen and enhance their experiential learning and enable graduates to foster a malleable approach to future employment and create a new vision for the fashion industry. The future is in the hands of our graduates, our future leaders, and innovators; therefore, it is essential we provide and support our graduated with a robust set of skills in the form of a relevant toolkit to ensure success. Responding and flexing to the changing industry patterns and requirements of graduates ensures success for current and future students this will also secure the rubrics and reputation of the outcomes of MFI undergraduate degree courses in the employability arena.

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