

FROM PLANET TO PEOPLE – HOW FASHION EDUCATION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO A MORE ETHICAL AND SUSTAINABLE FASHION FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

As educators, we believe we have a responsibility to ensure that our graduates are able to contribute to a more sustainable fashion industry. In order to facilitate meaningful learning experiences that support this goal, we must understand what influences student behaviour and motivates them to act.

This paper compares feedback from two cohorts of second-year Bachelor of Design (Fashion) students – the first in 2008¹ and the second in 2016. Students completed a survey after learning about sustainability and ethics within the wider fashion system. This learning experience took the form of lectures, studio-based projects and a semi-commercial project focusing on sustainable business models.

The survey design encourages students to reflect on their own values and decision-making process as they navigate the ethical dilemmas and complex issues surrounding sustainability and the fashion industry. The survey results inform recommendations for fashion educators about learning and teaching strategies that will support students to become sustainable fashion practitioners.

CONTEXT

The Bachelor of Design (Fashion) at Otago Polytechnic is an established and globally ranked fashion degree and is included in the Business of Fashion top 50 Global Fashion School Rankings 2016.² In the first year of the degree, students gain an understanding of design as a discipline and an enabler in society. In second year, students examine contemporary design issues and research practice. They are encouraged to respond to these issues and consider their relevance to their own design practice. The third and final year is directed at helping students articulate their own design philosophy and direction.

Sustainability is one of Otago Polytechnic's core values, and shapes everything from operations and teaching to engagement with businesses, communities and other institutions. With the goal that every graduate will have the skills and knowledge to become sustainable practitioners in their chosen field, each programme is committed to embedding sustainability effectively into the curriculum. Rather than teaching sustainability in isolation, the Bachelor of Design (Fashion) has embedded sustainability into the assessed learning outcomes of every paper in the three-year degree. The fashion curriculum has been adapted to reflect significant changes in awareness and attitudes towards sustainable practices within the fashion industry since 2008.

The learning experience referred to in this paper includes an introduction to a range of contemporary design issues including ethics and sustainability. Students apply this learning to a semi-commercial, team-based project that

requires them to collaborate with a local retailer and form a small fashion business. Assessed project outcomes include demonstration of sustainable design processes and practices and a sustainable business model. Students critically evaluate their design choices throughout the project, while considering their own attitudes and values regarding sustainable and ethical practices in the fashion industry alongside those of the commercial marketplace.



Figure 1. Final presentation of semi-commercial fashion project to retail collaborator, 2016.³ Image: Otago Daily Times ©.

It has taken some time for the fashion industry to take heed of warnings sounded in the late 1990s. Despite an initial focus on the impact of fibre and fabric processing on the environment and material provenance in the 1990s and 2000s, we now see that the fundamental cause of unsustainability in the fashion industry is exponential growth and consumption. Universally referred to as “fast fashion,” these current issues are succinctly addressed by Tamsin Lejeune in a recent article in the online Ethical Fashion Forum.⁴ Lejeune asks whether “fast fashion” can be sustainable and presents an overview of the challenges facing the industry and an evaluation of positive solutions.⁵

The world’s largest summit on fashion sustainability, held in Copenhagen in May 2012, gathered more than a thousand key stakeholders in the industry to discuss the importance of making the fashion industry sustainable. The resulting Copenhagen Fashion Summit, held annually, continues to challenge the industry with a global fashion agenda and an imperative to “mobilise the international fashion industry, to transform the way we produce and consume fashion.”⁶

In the eight years between our two surveys, the world has witnessed the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in April 2013, a tragedy that cut short the lives of 1136 garment workers. That disaster focused worldwide attention on deathtrap workplaces within the garment industry and the plight of garment workers forced to work for low wages to meet the ever-increasing demand for fast, cheap fashion. Odhikar, a Bangladesh-based human rights organisation founded in October 1994, has conducted a comprehensive investigative report into the Rana Plaza collapse.⁷

Ethical practices and workers' rights continue to be a highly visible challenge for sustainable practice in the fashion and textile industry, highlighting the ongoing need for education around the Triple Bottom Line framework,⁸ the encouragement of transparency within business models and accountability across the sector.

Closer to home, Baptist World Aid Australia has conducted research into worker exploitation in the fashion and electronics industries. Since 2013, the organisation has produced the *Australian Fashion Report – The Truth Behind the Barcode*.⁹ This report sheds light on how individual companies are addressing the issues of forced labour, child labour and exploitation. Companies are graded from A to F based on the strength of their labour rights management systems to mitigate the risk of exploitation in their supply chain. In 2015, New Zealand retailer Glassons scored an F in the workers' rights, monitoring and training, and traceability and transparency categories for not disclosing its practices. In the 2017 report, Glassons received a B- average grade overall, with an improved C- grade in the worker empowerment section, acknowledging that it is making significant inroads into improving its supply chain transparency and traceability.

Internationally, high-profile designers such as Stella McCartney and Vivienne Westwood are challenging the existing fashion system through sustainable business models, sourcing of alternative materials and transparent supply chains. McCartney and Westwood use interviews¹⁰ and public "protest" to exert their influence and highlight worker exploitation and environmental issues in the fashion industry.¹¹ Sustainable fashion bloggers are a relatively new form of social media influencers and are followed by thousands online. Fifty of the best have recently been recognised by Green Match, a UK-based sustainable energy organisation. Green Match acknowledged bloggers who "focus on sustainable fashion and really put time and effort in inspiring others in a creative manner" as part of the Go Slow Awards 2016.¹² Ecouterre, soon to merge with its original website Inhabit, ¹³ was created by fashion activists and creates up-to-the-minute content that tackles ethical issues and showcases innovation in sustainable design.

In New Zealand, designers such as Kowtow and Kate Sylvester continue to integrate sustainable practices and transparent supply chains into their business models. Kowtow focuses on sourcing organic materials and on ethical working conditions in fibre, textile and garment production.¹⁴ Kate Sylvester takes a holistic approach to all aspects of business and is a member of the NZ Sustainable Business Network.¹⁵

SUSTAINABLE LEARNING AND TEACHING

In 2008, academic writing and research on the learning and teaching of sustainable practice in higher education was limited to a handful of researchers.¹⁶ A growing interest in ethical and sustainable practices in the fashion industry has led to a growth in the number of academic and industry (practice) based commentators writing about this topic and discussing how higher education, the fashion curriculum and the industry can address these issues.

The 1990 Talloires Declaration¹⁷ encourages higher education institutions internationally to address issues around sustainable literacy. A ten-point action plan was established as a framework to provide institutions with strategies for integration of sustainable principles into the curriculum. To date, this has been signed by five hundred higher education institutions worldwide.

In his 2015 book *Higher Education for Sustainable Development*, Kerry Shephard highlights the barriers to sustainable integration and reconsiders past research and discusses current paradigms and practices in higher education.¹⁸ Shephard introduces new ways to integrate sustainability into teaching and learning using what he calls Grounded Theory Methodology (the construction of theory and new paradigms through the analysis of data). Shephard's model for higher education is "a system designed to help students to achieve this enlightened state of struggling" (to question their own ability to make sense of diverse information through critical thinking).¹⁹ He describes the model as the parts of a jigsaw puzzle, due to the complexity of the stakeholders and their roles. These stakeholders include university heads, management, curriculum developers, teachers and students. He writes of the importance of critical thinking as a learning outcome that allows students to interpret information in a meaningful way, and highlights an

“increasing awareness that community engagement provides high-impact learning opportunities for students.”²⁰ Shephard further underlines the importance of a constantly changing paradigm for sustainability integration in higher education, a position developed from earlier research by himself and others.²¹

Cosette Armstrong and Melody Leheuw (from Oklahoma State and Kansas State Universities respectively) explore how textile and apparel educators are integrating sustainability into their curricula. They conclude that despite current barriers such as a lack of resources and institutional support, curricular content limitations and a sometimes hostile fashion industry, “the future holds ample promise for the acceleration of integration if supported by mechanisms such as continuing education and professional development as well as some philosophical shifts within the discipline.”²²

Since the early 2000s, Alison Gwilt, Sandy Black, Kate Fletcher and Lynda Grose²³ have all produced comprehensive and accessible texts on the subject aimed at fashion practitioners, students and teachers. These include articles, resources, case studies and best-practice exemplars, and inform the reader of new knowledge and sustainable design methods for positive change.

This body of research, writing, publication and commentary on the integration of sustainability in teaching, the implications for higher education and the benefits for the fashion industry is a growing one. As educators, we can ensure that this body of knowledge is accessible to students in order to support them to become sustainable practitioners.

METHOD

In this context, a reflective survey explores how students learn about sustainability and then interpret and apply their knowledge to current and future decision-making. Questions are designed around four main themes:

- Current knowledge, awareness of sustainability in a fashion industry context
- Sources of information on the environmental and ethical impacts of the fashion industry
- Use of sustainable practices
- Ethics and decision-making

Of the 11 survey questions (Appendix 1), the first seven are closed-ended, using either a Likert scale rating system or picklist to determine attitudes and behaviour, allowing responses to be readily quantified and analysed. The final four questions are open-ended questions that add depth and context, but are also less quantifiable and comparable than the closed-ended questions.

The survey was first conducted in 2008²⁴ with 29 second-year Bachelor of Design (Fashion) students, and was repeated with 16 students from the 2016 Bachelor of Design (Fashion) cohort. Both groups completed the surveys after completing a similar learning experience. In this paper, we compare the post-experience survey results from both cohorts to track changing patterns of behaviour. Neither set of results was tested for statistical significance due to the small sample size, so we have focused on emergent trends and patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

More students in the 2016 cohort rated their awareness of sustainable practices within the fashion and apparel industry as strong (15% increase over the 2008 cohort). When asked about the priority issues affecting the fashion industry today, half of the 2016 cohort listed fast fashion/mass consumption, while this did not feature at all in 2008.

Both cohorts highlighted issues such as the environmental impact of fabric dyeing, and of garment production in general as well as unethical labour practices in the industry.

The 2016 cohort were much more likely to be influenced by designers and more likely to look to friends, family, social media and tertiary study when sourcing information on the environmental and ethical impacts of the fashion industry (Figure 2).

Both cohorts felt positive about the future of the fashion industry and its ability to incorporate sustainability into practice. All students in both cohorts said they would incorporate sustainable approaches into their design practice, nominating strategies and approaches such as sourcing of sustainable fabrics where possible; using natural fibres; considering garment life cycles; zero waste patternmaking; ensuring ethical working conditions; and avoiding the use of harmful chemicals and dyes in fabric production.

When asked to consider how environmental and ethical issues impact on the work of a fashion design student, the 2016 cohort indicated stronger agreement with the statement “to a great extent” than their 2008 counterparts (Figure 3).

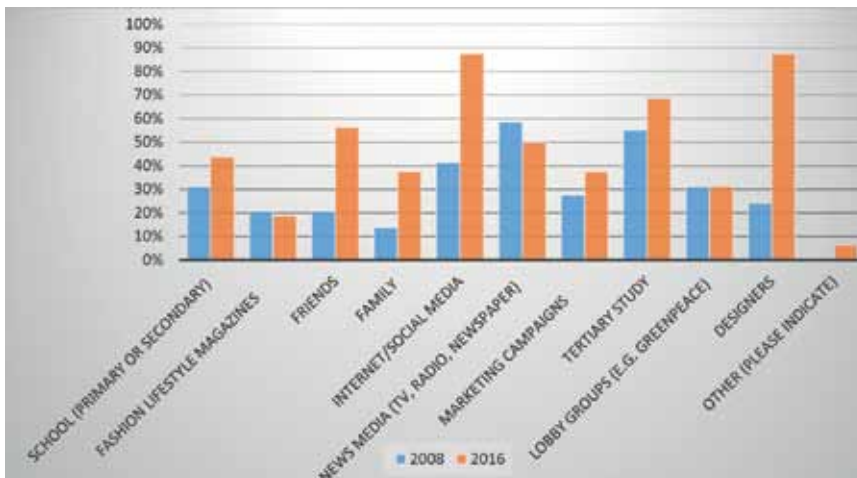


Figure 2. Sources of information for students on the environmental and ethical impacts of the fashion industry, as elicited by the surveys.

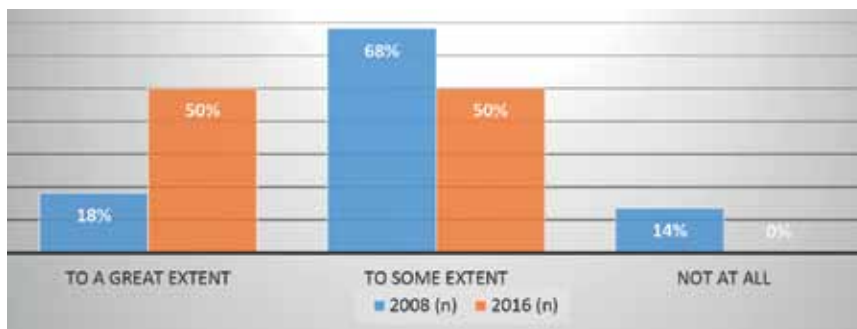


Figure 3. How environmental and ethical issues affect the work of fashion design students, according to the surveys.

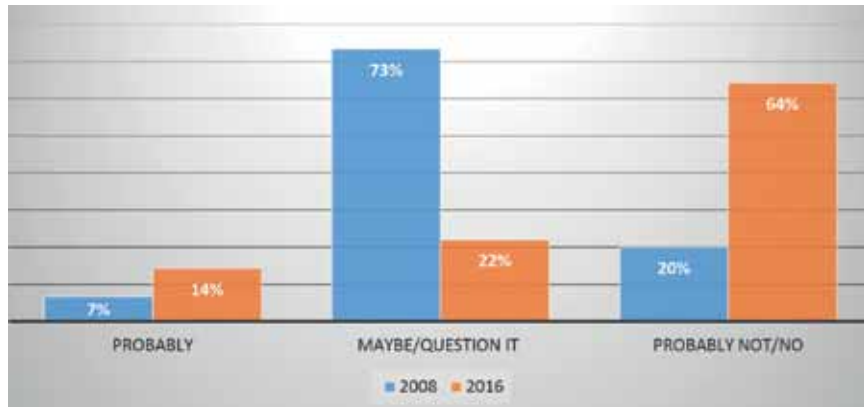


Figure 4. Responses to a request to engage in unsustainable practices as a student, according to the surveys.

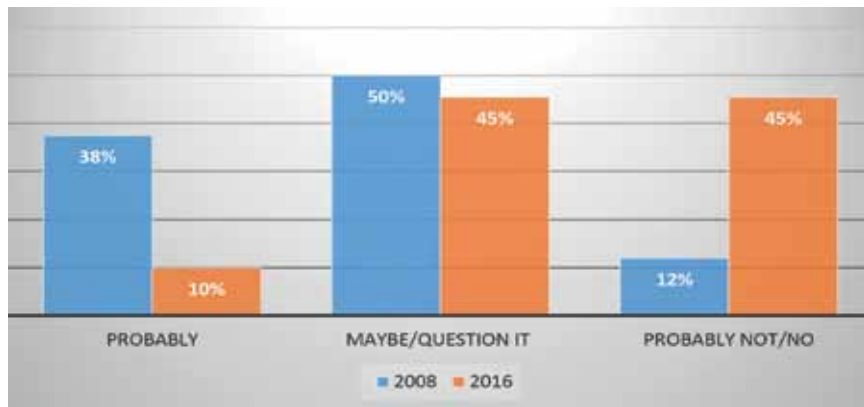


Figure 5. Responses to a request to engage in unsustainable practices as a new graduate working in the fashion industry, according to the surveys.

Students reflected on how their own values help them navigate some of the ethical dilemmas and complex issues they are likely to face as participants in the fashion industry. When asked how they would react to a request to engage in an activity as a student considered to be unsustainable practice, significantly more of the 2016 cohort said they would take a stand and not agree to participate in the activity, with a corresponding drop in those who may participate or question the activity. (Figure 4)

Positioning themselves as new graduates faced with the same situation – i.e., a request to engage in an activity as a student considered unsustainable practice – students from the 2016 cohort were more likely to strongly question or not participate in the activity, with a corresponding decrease in those who would participate. (Figure 5)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students learn best in an environment that supports personal engagement, discovery and reflection. To achieve this we need to acknowledge what influences, motivates and inspires them to act, and allow them to question and challenge norms and pre-conceived ideas about sustainability.

If designers are exerting more influence over student opinion, more use can be made of industry-based collaborative projects, guest speakers, online interviews and podcasts in programme design and delivery. Educators should encourage the critical use of Web-based research and social media channels as a valid source of information for students working in the tertiary environment. At the same time, students require support to filter and critically evaluate sources and information in order to develop an informed personal response to challenges facing the fashion industry. Resources that provide unbiased information on industry practices, such as the Baptist World Aid report and the Ethical Fashion Forum, are a valuable tool for educators wanting to develop understanding and encourage in-class debate and discussion.

Institutional membership of fashion education and industry networks ensures that students gain access to reliable, current and relevant information. Sustainability needs to be part of business-as-usual and contextual to the fashion industry, embedded in the learning outcomes and applied in a meaningful way through assessed projects. If sustainability is a stand-alone subject, students may fail to make connections with their fashion industry context.

Finally, we maintain that students must leave tertiary education armed with tools and strategies to create positive change and with confidence in their ability to contribute to a more sustainable fashion future.

APPENDIX I

Reflective Survey on Sustainability in the fashion Industry

The information collected for this survey will be used solely for the purpose of research to improve teaching. Participation is entirely voluntary, and no personal information is collected. Your decision to participate in this survey or not will have no bearing on your academic progress. All completed surveys will be destroyed once data is collated.

Please indicate by ticking the appropriate box	very strong	strong	medium	weak	very weak
Question 1 How do you rate your current knowledge of sustainability?					
Question 2 How do you rate your current awareness of sustainable practices within the fashion and apparel industry?					

Question 3 Are you aware of the following concepts?	Yes – I know about it	Yes – I've heard of it but don't know much about it	Never heard of it
Carbon footprint			
Reduce/Reuse/Recycle			
Triple bottom line			
Cradle to grave			
Cradle to cradle			
Social responsibility			
Fair trade			
Sustainable design			
Slow fashion			
Ethical fashion			
Closed loop production			

Question 4	
Where do you get information on the environmental and ethical impacts of the fashion industry? (tick any relevant sources)	
School (primary or secondary)	
Fashion lifestyle magazines	
Friends	
Family	
Internet/Social media	
News media (TV, radio, newspaper)	
Marketing campaigns	
Tertiary study	
Lobby groups (e.g. Greenpeace)	
Designers	
Other (please indicate)	

Question 5	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
Please indicate by ticking the appropriate box			
How do environmental and ethical issues affect your work? (as a fashion design student)			

Question 6	Already do	Would consider doing	Would not consider doing
Using the following list of actions, please indicate whether you:			
Seek out information on environmental issues relating to design			

Question 7	Hopeful	Undecided	Not hopeful
How do you feel about the future of the fashion industry and its ability to incorporate sustainability into practice?			
Please indicate by ticking the appropriate box			

<p>Question 8</p> <p>What do you perceive to be the priority issues affecting the fashion industry today? (Please list in order of most important to least important)</p>
<p>Question 9</p> <p>If you were asked to engage in an activity as a student that you considered to be unsustainable practice, how would you react?</p>
<p>Question 10</p> <p>If you were asked to engage in an activity as a new graduate working in the fashion industry that you considered to be unsustainable practice, how would you react?</p>
<p>Question 11</p> <p>Do you intend to incorporate sustainable approaches into your design practice? If so, how would you go about this?</p>
<p>Thank you for participating in this survey – Caroline Terpstra & Tracy Kennedy</p>

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- 3 David Loughley, "Fashion Students Pitching Their Best," *Otago Daily Times*, 6 November 2016, <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/campus/otago-polytechnic/fashion-students-pitching-their-best> (accessed 12 December 2016).
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- 18 Kerry Shephard, *Higher Education For Sustainable Development* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).
- 19 Shephard, *Higher Education*, 37-9.
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