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Figure 1. Dzaleka maker embeds a handwritten message for our students to discover. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

An evaluation of the 'Pockets of Love' project.

The reciprocity between research, KE and the curriculum.

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Executive Summary

Pockets of Love was a practice-based, intercultural learning project delivered during the 2024–25 academic year within LCF’s MA Fashion, Textiles, Technology programme. Co-designed by Prof Helen Storey and course leader Alice Richardson, in collaboration with Deepa Patel and David Betteridge, the project builds on over a decade of sustained creative partnerships with refugee communities in Malawi, Mozambique, and the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, working closely with UNHCR.

At the heart of the brief was a textile artwork created by the Dzaleka Arts Lab (DAL) in Malawi: *Pockets of Love*, a large blanket made from jean pockets and hand embroidery. Students were invited to respond creatively to this work while working under constraints that mirrored refugee camp conditions—hand-making only, use of second-hand or found materials, and techniques that could be replicated without electricity or machinery. Student’s completed works were returned to Dzaleka, establishing a reciprocal, material dialogue.

Purpose and Approach

The project aimed to explore how textile practice can engage meaningfully with climate, social, and racial justice by foregrounding lived conditions, material scarcity, and relational exchange. An embedded qualitative evaluation (student interviews, Padlet feedback, and staff/partner reflections) examined impacts on student learning, wellbeing, ethical awareness, and pedagogical design.

Methods

This evaluation used a qualitative design to explore student experiences of the *Pockets of Love* brief. One-to-one interviews were conducted with students in the 2024–25 cohort during the final weeks of the unit, alongside review of course documentation and written student feedback collected via Padlet. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and checked for accuracy.

Data were analysed thematically through an iterative, collaborative process involving the lead evaluator, a graduate research assistant, and the project leads. Emergent themes were refined through discussion and used to inform both the findings and future iterations of the brief. Ethical approval was granted by the UAL Research and Knowledge Exchange Ethics Committee.

Key Impacts

The project had a profound effect on students’ creative practice and sense of responsibility as designers:

- **Creative Practice & Material Awareness: Working by hand with waste materials** fundamentally reshaped students’ relationships to time, labour, and materials. Constraints fostered adaptability,

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patience, and attentiveness, reframing imperfection and resistance as generative rather than problematic.

- **Wellbeing & Reflection:** Slow, repetitive hand-making supported mental wellbeing, offering emotional grounding for a predominantly international cohort navigating cultural and personal transition. Collaborative making strengthened peer connection and collective care.
- **Empathy & Ethical Orientation:** Knowing their work was being made *for* specific people in Dzaleka transformed motivation and standards of care. Students moved beyond abstract empathy toward ethical decision-making grounded in safety, accessibility, and context.
- **Relational & Cross-Cultural Learning:** Students engaged with London-based communities while also recognising shared craft traditions across cultures. Textile making functioned as a non-verbal language for dialogue, recognition, and mutual visibility.

Ethical Tensions and Learning

The project surfaced important ethical complexities rather than resolving them prematurely. Students grappled with questions of usefulness, privilege, representation, and the tension between imagination and livelihoods. Staff and partners reflected on the challenge of holding care, creativity, and economic reality simultaneously. Uncertainty—geopolitical, institutional, and relational—was recognised as an intrinsic condition of socially engaged creative practice.

Pedagogical Value

The open-ended structure of the brief supported creative autonomy, collaboration, and ownership, while also revealing the need for clearer framing around audience, circulation, and limits of impact. Embedding the project early in the MA programme successfully bridged hand skills, community engagement, and preparation for independent and industry-facing practice.

Core Insight

Pockets of Love demonstrates that making is not only about producing objects, but about visibility, care, and being remembered. Textile practice emerged as a powerful, materially grounded way to engage with climate, social, and racial justice—affirming creativity as both an ethical act and a means of connection across profound differences in geography, resources, and lived experience.

Future Directions

Future iterations will strengthen partnerships (e.g. UNHCR's Made51, Kibibe, local SME) to address student concerns around commercial viability while maintaining ethical integrity. The evolving “pocket” methodology—reciprocal exchange through material messages—offers a sustainable framework for ongoing dialogue, learning, and shared imagination across continents.

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Background

Prof Helen Storey and Alice Richardson (Course leader) have a longstanding track record of working with refugee communities in camps in Malawi and Mozambique in collaboration with UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency). This way of working is also founded in Helen's 10-year track record of co-creating projects in the world's largest Syrian refugee camp, Zaatari on the Jordan/ Syria border. In both African camps, craft, tailoring, painting and fashion artefact making is practised and brings together the opportunities for storytelling, community, upskilling and livelihoods.

Helen and Alice, building on these experiences, of work from the previous year, and in collaboration with project partners Deepa Patel and David Betteridge, co-designed a brief that would ask students to consider the challenges faced by refugees when they do creative work in the refugee camps.



Figure 2. Refugee Camp in Dzaleka, November 2024. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

The Pockets of Love project ran for 5 weeks in the spring term of the 2024-2025 academic cycle for students on the MA Fashion, Textiles, Technology course. For this brief, students were asked to respond creatively to a textile artwork that had been created by a group of makers, the "Dzaleka Arts Lab" (DAL), in the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi, who have a long-term collaborative practice with Helen, Alice, Deepa and David. The artwork is called 'Pockets of Love,' and is a blanket made from a patchwork of the pockets sections of multiple pairs of jeans, embellished with hand stitched embroideries (See below). Students were asked to create work in response to the Pockets of Love blanket, and to do so conscious of the conditions that the makers in Dzaleka would work under.

About Pockets of Love

“Pockets of Love” was created by the makers of the “Dzaleka Arts Lab” (DAL). This piece was created collectively in response to their chosen theme of ‘Home’ and is a creative response to a local scam they encountered when seeking bails of second-hand clothes to make diverse textile artefacts. They expected to receive skirts and jeans within the bails of clothes they bought, but on opening them, found the trader had cut all the pieces in half; selling the tops to DAL and the bottom halves to someone else. At first they were filled with anger and disappointment, but they then realised with the pockets, being the only plentiful parts now available, they could, if stitched together, form a unique artefact. Many weeks of cutting and sewing began.

The finished piece’s weight and size suggested it as a unique blanket intended for helping to heal trauma, whilst also becoming a method to continue surprise conversations to inspire people across continents. The pockets suggested a novel way to communicate with others, as within each one hand-written messages can be passed from each maker to individuals who interact with the piece.



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Students were asked to use hand making techniques, rather than using sewing machines or other electrical devices, to use only second hand or 'found' materials, and to try to use skills that could be replicated by makers in the refugee camps. Students were also told that their finished works would be taken back to Dzaleka to be shared with the refugees who had gifted the Pockets of Love blanket.

"Water is very precious and electricity and the internet often cut off, basic provision for food is supplemented by the World Food Programme, families receive \$5 per month to live off, consequently, people have had to become highly adaptable, resilient, and innovative in how they 'home make' and care for their families. Once a year climate change and the coming of the hurricane season destroys precarious dwellings and brings Malaria into the community, but above all else, how hope for the future manifests is a work of faith and individual courage."
(Exert from the brief)



Figure 3. Children playing in the back streets of Dzaleka. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

The brief had the following aims:

- To create a new form of reciprocal craft making across different geographies, cultures and life circumstances.
- To enable students to explore the conditions and perspectives of makers living in refugee camps in Africa.
- To enable students to think differently about the materials and techniques they may have available to them as designers.
- To expand where creativity, technique and practise can lead, from ways of working to potential career paths.
- To provide a unique opportunity to experience engagement with the climate, racial & social justice principles and the activation of UAL's creative attributes framework.

Principles for Climate, Social and Racial Justice



Figure 4: The Principles for Climate, Social and Racial Justice developed by the ADAL .

The Principles for Climate, Social and Racial Justice were co-developed by staff and students to provide an ethical framework that surfaces the connections between climate, social and racial justice to guide student’s creative practice and professional development. The embedding of these principles in teaching across UAL is aligned with both the Climate Action Plan and the UAL Strategy.

The ‘Pockets of Love’ brief is an example of practice-based teaching that can vividly bring to life the intersection between the challenges of a changing climate and the lives of people who are already the most affected by its impact. Students are asked to consider making in an environment in which clean water, electricity, and the internet are not reliably available, where access to many resources and freedoms, including rights to employment and higher education are starkly limited.

Our embedded evaluation approach

This evaluation involved a collaborative partnership between Dr Rose Thompson (RT), the Evaluation and Evidence manager from the Social Purpose Lab, and Prof Helen Storey (HS), who led on designing the ‘Pockets of Love’ brief. It was also supported by the Academic Discourse and Learning Committee (ADAL) who initially developed the Principles for Climate, Social and Racial Justice. As this brief was very experiential in nature, our approach was to explore with students through qualitative interviews their experience of responding to the ‘Pockets of Love’ blanket. We had the following aims:

1. To identify areas of teaching that were successful in supporting students to develop their own creative practice through responding to ‘Pockets of Love’, and to identify areas of challenge that may be further developed by the teaching team.
2. To explore with students their perspectives on the brief and on the embedding of the principles for climate, social and racial justice.

Through partnership working, RT and HS discussed areas of the unit that may benefit from an understanding of the student perspective during the development of a proposal for the UAL Research Ethics Committee,

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which informed the questions that were asked during student interviews. RT conducted all interviews with students under conditions of anonymity. We then took a collaborative approach to analysis in which RT worked with graduate research assistant, Jiaqi Zheng (JZ) and HS to interpret the data as described below.

Methods

Evaluation design:

This was a predominantly qualitative study that drew on one-to-one interviews with students, teaching staff and project partners, and course documentation to explore how students experienced the 'Pockets of Love' brief.

Qualitative interviews:

All students participating in the project in the 2024-2025 cohort were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview with RT in the last 4 weeks of the unit. They were offered a £10 voucher as a thankyou payment for participating.

Students were asked questions about their experiences with the brief, including their experience of encountering the work of refugees in their classroom, and of producing a creative project in response. They were also asked about aspects of the unit that they thought were successful and where they experienced challenges, and how they responded to the Principles for Climate, Social and Racial Justice.

Interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed through the Microsoft Teams application. RT anonymised all transcripts by hand and checked them against the audio recordings of the interviews for accuracy, correcting errors in transcription where they were found. The evaluation team was supplied with additional qualitative data in the form of a Padlet that was used to collect feedback from students by the teaching team.

Data analysis and interpretation:

Qualitative data was analysed using a thematic approach which used the following procedure:

1. RT familiarised herself with the transcripts through the process of anonymised and checking the transcripts against the audio recordings for accuracy, and in reviewing student contributions to the padlet.
2. JZ, a recent UAL graduate researcher, familiarised herself with anonymised transcripts. RT worked with JZ to conduct an initial thematic analysis by identifying key words or related ideas and perspectives that appeared repeatedly through the interview transcripts.
3. RT and JZ consolidated these ideas into an initial set of key emergent themes and curated a selection of extended quotes in a miro board, which HS, JZ and RT reviewed together.

4. HS discussed her reflections, which added a further layer of understanding to the data – and built some feedback into the next iteration of the brief for delivery in academic cycle 2025-2026¹.
5. RT, HS and JZ further developed the themes identified in Steps 2 and 3 through further discussion and preparation of the findings section of this report.

The proposal for this evaluation was approved as part of an evaluation programme by the UAL Research and Knowledge Exchange ethics committee (application ref: 026-25-01 'Evaluation of Student Experiences of the Climate, Social and Racial Justice Framework')

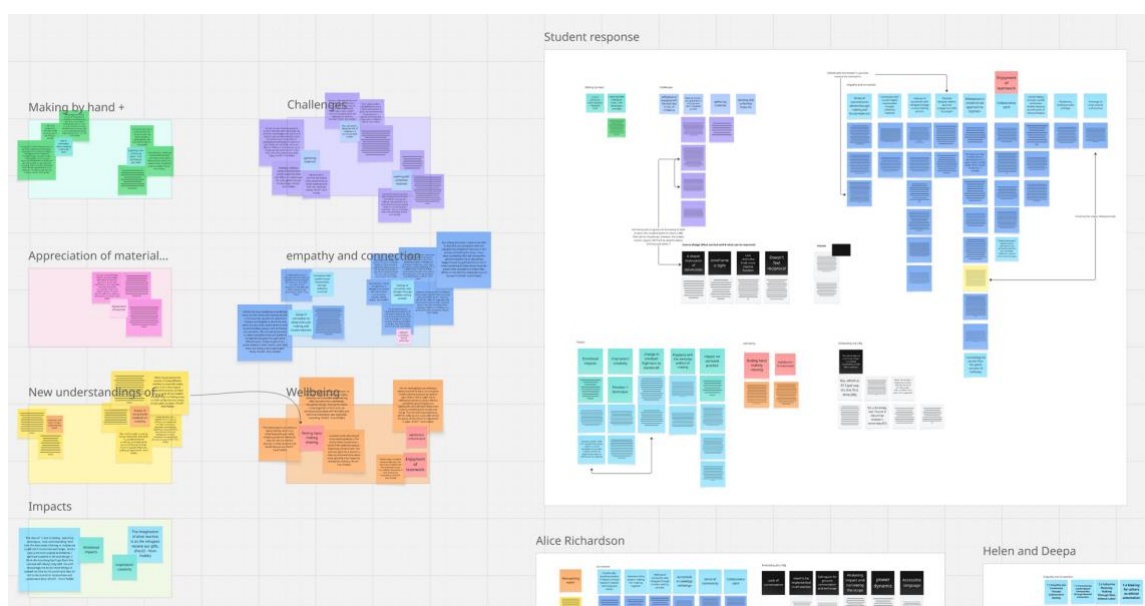


Figure 5: Screenshot of an example of the analysis process through using Miro.

¹ A number of changes to the brief had already been decided on at this point necessitated by the closure of substantial portions of the UNHCR activity at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp – see Discussion Section for reflections on this

Findings

Participants:

- We completed five interviews with students who participated in the 'Pockets of Love' Brief. All students were female international students from China.
- Feedback from four additional students was supplied to the evaluation team in the form of a Padlet.
- We completed interviews with two members of academic staff involved in the delivery of the brief.
- We completed one interview with a project partner who works on a regular basis with HS in international contexts.



Figure 6. Students engaging with the PoL piece.
(Photograph by Helen Storey)

Key findings

In the following sections we describe the key insights drawn from the analysis of the interviews with students, staff and the project partner, and from feedback provided to the course team on the Padlet. We have arranged these findings in two sections – first, the impact of participating in this brief on students, and second, learning about the delivery of this brief, and its integration into the broader work conducted by Prof. Storey in Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

Impact on students

Through our conversations with students and through their feedback on the Padlet we learned about aspects of this project that had a memorable impact on students. These impacts can be thought of as falling into two broad categories; a) personal impacts on the individual makers with respect to their own creative

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practice, ideas, understanding and wellbeing; and b) students sense of themselves as part of a bigger community or their place within a global system, and the knock on effect this also had on their creative practice and future work.

A.1 Personal impacts: Understanding and appreciation of materials and hand crafts

Practical realities of creating by hand

All of the students described their day-to-day practice as involving machinery and digital technology. Within this context they described being required to work with found or recycled materials, and to do so by hand, gave them a new appreciation of the materials they worked with, and allowed them to reconnect with hand craft techniques they may have been familiar with, or learn new techniques.

"I'm really enjoying it because, like you know, for my personal project I use the digital embroidery [...] most of work are made by the digital versions included, neat sample." (Student 03 – from interview)

"[...] Due to the requirements of the project, we cannot use machinery, but only traditional manual skills, which has prompted me to learn different types of manual skills." (Student 08 - from Padlet)

All students remarked on the amount of time making their objects by hand took, and how this forced them to work more slowly and to appreciate the difficulty of working materials into objects by hand. Engaging with unfamiliar waste materials also introduced physical difficulty and risk. Students described materials breaking under tension, cutting skin, or resisting control due to their qualities.

"I never use this material to weave and it was too slippery, but as a human being and woman, I am good at controlling material, so it went well. But I have still been hurt by this sharp and hard material." (Student 02 - from Padlet)

Some students spoke of how this slowness in some cases resulted in them not spending as much time on their projects as they would have liked to as they had commitments on other units within their course.

"And it's in our other big programme inside so we didn't take many time for it." (Student 06 – from interview data)

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Appreciation of waste and second-hand materials as sensory and creative resource

Within the brief, students were asked to only use materials that were found or recycled in their local environment. Students described how handling discarded materials transformed waste from an abstract sustainability issue into a tactile creative experience. This encouraged students to think differently about the materials they use in their practice, and how they use those materials.

Figure 7. Flowers made from the base of discarded water bottles, melted into form with a candle. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

“I learned how to make use of the limited resource and tried to think about how to find an alternative material when something is not accessible” (Student 02 – from Padlet)

“[...] In this process, we made full use of all materials and completed a zero-waste design.” (Student 09 - from Padlet)

“I’d never been to a charity shop before, and visiting a few made me realize just how serious clothing waste really is. It also reminded me that we need to spend more time figuring out organic and effective ways to breathe new life into clothes we no longer wear.” (Student 07 - from Padlet)



Figure 8. Close-up. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

One student contrasted her experience in working by hand with that of using digital techniques as allowing her different sensory understandings of the materials she worked with.

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*“Yeah, actually, we love traditional techniques and feel the temperature of the fabric and [...]the material, how it's like feel like and we do everything by our hand and yes [...] it's like really warm [Discussion of other aspects of work before interviewee returns to theme later in interview] I prefer to use like handmade and domestic machine and the digital things make me feel like too, too cold.”
(Student 05 – from interview data)*

This had an impact on student’s creativity, emerging through dialogue with materials, where form, colour and structure were shaped by found conditions rather than preconceived design intentions.

“I realised there were slight differences of belts that I collected from many places as it just used to be a simple and neglected "belt" in my life. The blue belts I collected from Shoreditch were wide, hard and stiff that were perfect for warp, while the thin and narrow white belts which were super suitable for weft. So the colours of my object was not my intentional design, it was designed by the interesting stories and my living environment.” (Student 02 - from Padlet)



“Seeing the labels come together to form a tie, an accessory associated with formality and personal expression, was especially rewarding. It gave new life to discarded elements and highlighted the subtle connections between people through clothing.

“(Student 03 - from Padlet)

Figure 9 & 10. “Care Label Tie”
(Photograph by Helen Storey)

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Material constraints and nurturing resourcefulness

The requirement to use second hand or found materials produced some challenges for students, who frequently encountered uncertainty when sourcing materials, challenging their previous assumptions about availability and control. One student explained how she planned to use waste materials but found that the shops where she thought they would be available simply discarded the relevant materials quickly after use.

At first, I couldn't find enough belts because the store didn't keep them. At the time I was disappointed and tried to just buy new one from Amazon, [but then] I have found there were many belts for packaging the print paper on each floor. And I have collected all of them from 1 floor to 10 floor, so I had enough white strapping belts, and it became the main colour of my work. I was super happy. (Student 02- from Padlet)

Others similarly expressed anxiety about whether sufficient materials could be gathered or whether shop owners would allow access to discarded garments.

"We also had to convince the charity shop owners to let us collect washing labels from old, discarded clothes." (Student 07 - from Padlet)



Figure 11. Patchwork of garment care labels hand sewn together. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

"I visited the Farrah shop, and they told me that tomorrow maybe you can come back to collect it. I will think about maybe I can collect a huge or massive care label that they cut for me because they also have the collaboration with LCF women's wear, and I already showed like lots of like recycle garments in their show in their store. Yeah. So, like another day when I come back to collect it, only four pieces or like less than 10, 10 care labels. Yeah, yeah. When I see that I was, oh, my God." (Student 03 – from interview data)

However other students spoke of collecting materials from the recycling units within LCF as giving her an insight into other people's creative process.

"I collected recycled thing from the uni and from my waste yarn and fabric because I also think this is a way to this is a way about seeing and sharing. [...] For this project, I would say it is a really good opportunity for myself to look back. What, where and what I have been through and especially when

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I collected those recycling things from the university recycling box, I actually feel like I'm looking at somebody else's like creativity journey." (Student 01 – from interview data)

These moments reframed material gathering for students as an active, relational, and time-consuming practice rather than a neutral preparatory step.

A.2 Personal impacts: Wellbeing and reflection through making, impacts on creative practice

Working slowly, working together and impacts on wellbeing

Students consistently described handmaking as a way of slowing down time, countering the highly productive, digitally accelerated pace of urban life. Slowness functioned as a form of emotional grounding, enabling bodily presence and moments of reflexivity.

"[...] in a like really big and developed city, everyone doing things really quick. I feel this is relaxing because like I got to force myself to slow down." (Student 01 – from interview data)

As students settled into slower rhythms, many described a reduction in emotional distress. Students reflected how concentrating on and repeating the task became calming.

*"What I enjoy most is the process of using different methods to assemble safety pins. It is a very **magical exploration process, so that I can put aside all my troubles** and just focus on finding a way to make safety pins into lamps, which **calms me down.**" (Student 08 - from Padlet)*

*"I actually loved collecting all those washing labels in the charity shop's warehouse—**haha! It felt oddly therapeutic.**" (Student 07 - from Padlet)*

Students consistently contrasted this project with more self-directed work, emphasising collaborative spirit, mutual support and communication.

*"I think it's totally different with my other project [...] My other project is more about like self-direction yeah and like for this project **we need to communicate** with our teams" (Student 03 – from interview data)*

Handmaking together within group settings further reinforced this relational dynamic.

"We enjoy teamwork, everyone has their own tasks [...] the process is very smooth and harmonious." (Student 09 - from Padlet)

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“[...] so we have a mini group chat and to share our experience when we done apart” (Student 03 – from interview data)

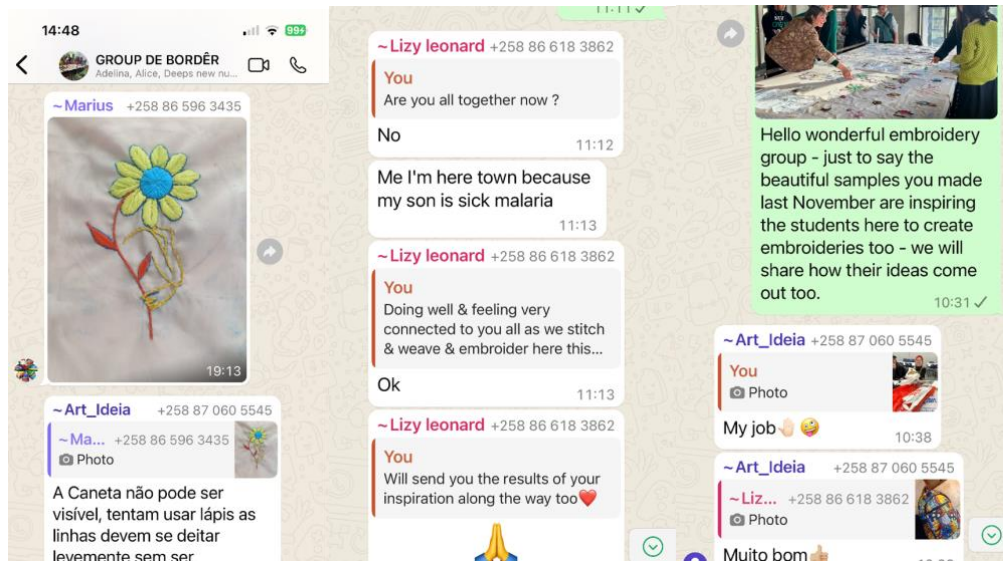


Figure 12. Conversation in the Whatsapp groupchat – making in real time across continents. (Screenshot by Helen Storey)

Space for reflection and creative development

For some, slowness also opened imaginative space, turning mundane tasks into moments of reflection.

“[...] collecting waste yarn while imagining how our friends far way can see our creative journey is really romantic and poetic thing to do.” (Student 01 - from Padlet)

“I enjoyed the hand-stitching process—it was both meditative and meaningful, allowing me to transform something often ignored into a deliberate, thoughtful design.” (Student 03 - from Padlet)

Many students contrasted hand-stitching with digital and machine-based processes, describing manual labour as ‘warmer’, more emotionally present, and materially attentive. Working without machinery encouraged adaptability, patience, and learning through constraint.

“Through the hand-stitching process, I gained a deeper appreciation for the tactile experience of fabric and craftsmanship. This project also made me reflect on the unnoticed discomfort these labels bring and how small details in clothing can affect our daily experiences.” (Student 03 - from Padlet)

“As a designer, I hadn’t stitched anything by hand for ages. When I had to make the tie without any electronic tools, I felt this wonderful sense of happiness, satisfaction, and calm that comes from

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creating something with my own two hands. That moment was so precious, and I'm really grateful to pockets of love for giving me the chance to experience it again." (Student 07 - from Padlet)

Engaging with their developing project in this slow way allowed students to become familiar with the difficulty of managing some materials, and to appreciate some of the imperfections these techniques produced, leading to new creative insights. For example, one student intentionally preserved rough edges to suggest growth over completion.

"It took me 20 hours to make. I quite like the shape that the waste belts created, it was not perfect like a brand new product, it was twisty already. Also I keep the rough edge without overlock, just to give it feeling of endless growing." (Student 02 - from Padlet)

"The hand-embroidery process was also tricky since the labels had different textures and stiffness, making it difficult to stitch them neatly and securely. However, overcoming these challenges made the final piece even more rewarding." (Student 03 - from Padlet)

While these experiences of slowness, attentiveness, and material engagement were often described in personal terms, they later became conditions through which students oriented their making toward others, an ethical shift explored in the following section. As collected materials were transformed through slow, manual processes, hand-stitching, weaving, patchworking—students described making as a site of reflection and emergence.

*"This project made me feel that **textiles can also be a bridge for people to communicate and express themselves.** It is fun to use the collected materials to assemble the desired look, and there are many unexpected results." (Student 04 - from Padlet)*



Figure 13. *Pockets of Love* – The Dzaleka Refugee Camp Makers. (Photograph by Dzaleka Arts Lab)

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Working in groups fostered a community of practice in which diverse approaches became visible and negotiable. Seeing others' work enabled students to recognise multiple perspectives and design identities, reframing making as a collective rather than individual process.

"I can tell the difference about each person's designed identity and also you got more perspective and position to see the same thing." (Student 01 – from interview data)

The MA course leader, Alice Richardson later reported seeing evidence of the impact of the pockets of love project on the way students thought about their own creative practices, and on work students produced for their final master's projects.

"With the student's slowing down process and thinking about hand-based techniques it led to how they approached their major projects and opened up their thinking to generate work with considerations for people, surroundings and environment as well. It also informed some of their personal ambitions, even to thoughts of how they would teach - One particular student, loved making the 'children's textile book' (What is love?) and she took that forward to create more sensory objects for wellbeing in her master's project – it would have been great to be able to extend the Pockets of Love project." (Alice Richardson)

B.1 Beyond the personal: Empathy, connection and a new sense of community

Encountering London-Based Communities Through Material Connection

Students were intentionally steered away from default reliance on machinery and luxury materials. Instead, they were encouraged to source from charity shops, reuse materials, and build collaborations independently.

"I think it helped them kind of develop their own skills in in kind of taking a lot away of what they naturally would go to, such as machinery [...], they were going to charity shops [...] using their own initiative they were able to kind of go out and get that collaboration, sourcing and meet new people." (Alice Richardson)

"It's helped me to communicate with others because I need to collect the materials from the stores and also I need to focus on the environment surrounding me and not only just to sit on the classroom and face with computers or doing our own works." (Student 02 – from interview data)

Collecting materials across London positioned the city not merely as a site of extraction, but as a relational field in which students encountered shop owners, neighbourhoods, and everyday negotiations. This process required attentiveness to the lived environment.

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*“I enjoyed the process of collecting materials. **I had to go outside and chat with people from the store.** It is always important to me to communicate with reality and observe the world and environment.” (Student 02 - from Padlet)*

Beyond logistical engagement, students began to attribute narrative and affective value to the materials they gathered. Found objects, such as clothing labels, stones, and waste fabrics, were understood as carriers of social memories, embedded with traces of past lives, languages, and cultural contexts.

*“I collected clothing labels from different charity shops, I realized that these small tags carry hidden stories—traces of past owners, different languages, and even cultural nuances. What surprised me the most was how **these often-overlooked elements could become a symbol of human connection.**” (Student 03 - from Padlet)*

“That process of transforming scattered labels into a single piece felt both personal and meaningful, making the project truly special to me.” (Student 03 - from Padlet)

“I think it's more like emotional connection between individuals and like, and we went to some vintage shops to get some waste pieces and some second-hand fabrics and combine all of this. It's the process of this is more like combine the memories, the emotional and yeah I think at the process in the process, we also can see reconsidering of the meaning of love and yes, the meaning of life.” (Student 05 – from interview data)

In this sense, material collection functioned as a form of situated research, where meaning emerged through proximity, repetition, and embodied encounter rather than abstraction. Working in groups further shaped how students navigated the city:

“[...] And another store said like I can cut it by myself, we can bring scissors and then we tell them maybe when you guys visit the store[...] you can bring the scissors too, maybe you have the chance to cut the care labels by yourself. Yeah, so we have a mini group chat and to share our experience when we done apart [...]” (Student 03 – from interview data)

By dividing into smaller teams and sharing experiences through group chats, students collectively gained practical and social knowledge about access, refusal and cooperation.

Making-for-others as ethical orientation

Students were able to spend time with the blanket stitched by hand by the makers from Dzaleka, and in their project to produce a creative response. One student described reading the blanket as a surface where different lives, rhythms, and personalities became legible through stitch and motif.

“I didn't respond to the blanket, but when I saw the blanket I saw there are so many different embroideries made by different people and like you can see their personality by just the simple pattern and simple technique [...] you can see wow, that's so delicate, the person must be very like patient and creative. But for some for some other embroidery you can see the stitches are really like...Raw for something and you know, maybe they this is done by a child or a man? [...] It's really interesting just to recognise the people by the stitches [...] the pattern they choose must be related to their life. Maybe they have the same life. Maybe they have these things and other things because these things exist in their life.” (Student 02 – from interview data)

Rather than giving students explicit instruction on the geo-political issues that were inherent in this project, students were encouraged to think about working in a kind of dialogue with the makers in Dzaleka Arts Lab through an exchange of made objects.

“[the students are] super excited to be working with people, you know, that aren't necessarily in the room with them, but, you know, hundreds of thousands of miles away.” (Alice Richardson, course leader)

“In this project the ‘object’ has always offered us two things, on the one hand the nature of the craft, the design and the making process itself, but as important, it's been a way to reach another human being, so experiencing materials and making as the foundations of how new relationships are born.” (Helen Story)

This prompted many students independently to research and reflect on refugee journeys and living conditions beyond the sessions provided. This had the impact of humanising refugees for the students and enabling them to begin to think about what the experience of displacement may be like.

“because I have researched about the situation of the refugee because they are leaving their original home to another country, but that's also I mean still in Africa, but they didn't, they didn't they don't have the same working rights as the person as the citizens in the country. They are not very equal. So I think this is very, you know, it's not very good because the equality is quite important and also the dignity and. Yeah, I think if I were in this situation, I will feel disappointed with us because I don't have the same right of human that's quite important” (Student 02 – from interview data)

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“It was a good way for me to understand the world and different groups of people. I had known what and why caused the situation of refugees and what they are suffering. I never expect that I would connect to the people from refugee camp, it made me feel the world doesn't only exist in the news of the media, panic and inequity is super real and closed to us.” (Student 02 - from Padlet)

“[...] When I was in the first class and I saw the one sentence I is very memorable. It's like the government only give \$5 for each family each month. I can imagine that, how they live” (Student 03 – from interview data)

For some students, small details about the Dzaleka refugee camp that emerged through conversations with Helen Storey about the project had a memorable impact on their ability to imagine the lived conditions of the people living there.

“[...] especially when Helen giving [another student] feedback as I remember what she said about how the refugee especially for girls or teenage girl? They might need something they want, they don't have room like they don't have their own room or own space and then they might want something to at least like covering or separate the space for themselves and that was a thing that I never think about. [...] seeing this small thing like privacy thing. It's kind of also important and inspiring for me as a person, a way to think.” (Student 01 – from interview data)

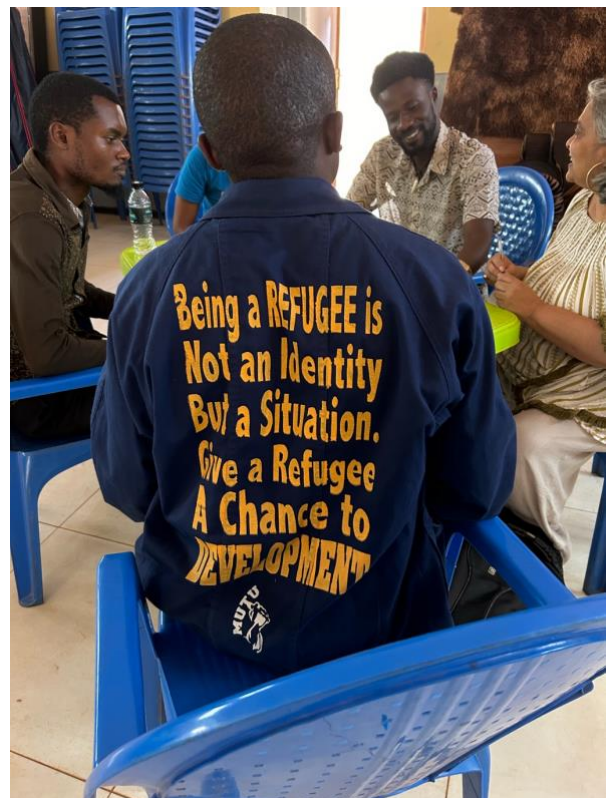


Figure 14. *“Being a REFUGEE is Not an Identity But a Situation - Give a Refugee A Chance to Development”* (Photograph by Helen Storey)

Engaging in handwork also led students to recognise the skill, patience, and creativity embedded in refugee’s textile practices.

“I think we saw the same embroidered on the blanket like, that was like a really delicate UFO looking like hands stitch, I thought that is like a machine stitch because it's so perfect. Almost like a digitised one. Like I just can't really imagine [...] how many time they spend on it and like how like they must

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be so focused on this...Like I did hand embroidered some poetry, that's already like I run out my patient on it [...] one thing is really impressive. I remember they used the soft drink can and then they cut it into like really tiny circle. They make sequins.” (Student 01 – from interview data)

Knowing that the work would be received by refugees fundamentally altered students’ motivations and standards of care. Unlike speculative or self-referential projects, this work was experienced as addressed to a specific group of people.

“[...] it's very different because we made the things in other project we don't know it well, all people or UAL will send to someone, so it just make it for myself, or for the like the words right on the pages for the market. So it basically just made for our imagination, so, but when we do the refugee stuff, we kind of feel like we know that we are doing this for them, so it's feel in the emotion for in for me and to want to make good things and to want to make them feel good to see these pieces.” (Student 06 – from interview data)

“I've never imagined like my work can really go through to Africa, to the guys can really see the work we made, yeah, so is a very good opportunity and to share my work to them and they're really happy, I already see the video...They're very happy. I think it's a warmable again [...] and they clapped their hands. I'm really happy to see this.” (Student 03 – from interview data)



Figure 16. Student presenting her 'Carrier Bag' woven vase on CSF Field Day (Photograph C/O CSF)

Figure 15. Child in Dzaleka holding the student's woven vase (Photograph by Helen Storey)



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A central challenge involved designing with an awareness of refugee's lived conditions rather than projected empathy. Students described the difficulty of selecting materials and techniques that were safe, accessible, and meaningful within constrained environments.

"Because I want to make a lamp that can be lit, I have to avoid all flammable items. Finally, I chose to use glass bottles and safety pins as the lamp material." (Student 08 - from Padlet)

"The biggest difficulty is that we need to put ourselves in the shoes of refugees to find suitable and convenient textile manufacturing processes and materials. We need to think about what they can most easily acquire in their daily lives and the most basic skills". (Student 09 - from Padlet)

"[...] we also see Helen's IG [Instagram] [...] imagine like I'm the person living in the Africa. Yeah, if I don't have any like electronic or some other digital one, what should I do? And like which material or resources that I can use?" (student 03 – from interview data)

Through the making process, students imagined recipients' lives, emotions, and responses, forming an affective connection mediated by materials.

"[...] in the process of making the lamp, I have been wondering who will receive this gift and whether he or she will be happy? Could my gift help him or her? I have something to think about what the person who received my lamp is like. Will he or she feel less lonely because of my work?" (Student 08 - from Padlet)

"We really get to know the daily lives of refugees and how they work with textiles, such as sewing, crochet, knitting." (Student 09 - from Padlet)



Figure 17. Women in the process of making PoL blanket in Dzaleka (Photograph by Helen Storey)

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“I really appreciate this opportunity for us to get connect with the refugees and to let us feel what we did is really worth to them is really this opportunity is very helpful for me to know when what I do really give to someone else the feelings of it” (Student 06 – from interview data).

Students recognised parallels between craft traditions across cultures, and in some cases consciously selected crafts that they felt would resonate with the makers from Dzaleka Arts Lab, and that may be familiar to them, as a form of communication.

“In my back home, the people are really well known about the bamboo weaving, and I mean the history of the technique is very long (...) People use the bamboo to weave different vase or some agriculture equipment just for I mean that's very functional. So I think I have researched the technique in Africa and they use this, I mean very similar technique to weave the basket. So I think it's a really a good thing to do something in common just to communicate.” (Student 02 – from interview data)

Helen remarks how the cohort, which is predominantly Chinese, has informed the cultural exchange.

“I think this is the second or third time that we have brought work back that has then been co-created into a brief with Alice for this particular course. And with every set of students, I can see that there's some things that they're coming up with in common and things that seem to be particular to them and their lives now. I think one of the things that's really notable is the fact that most of the students are Chinese. In fact, they're all Chinese this year, bar one, and last year they were all Chinese and so that brings in an added dimension, which is that their own traditions and making histories can be referred back to. And often because we're asking them to work by hand by default, it goes back to things that they may have been taught as young girls in terms of crafts.” (Helen Storey)

This orientation toward care was also expressed through symbolic gestures, where writing and drawing became acts of emotional offering rather than decoration.

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"I think it is very impressive to write the vision on the stone with colored pencils. In this process, we will not only write Chinese and English on the front and back, but also draw some patterns with positive healing power, such as flowers and sunshine. We are looking forward to these beautiful words and patterns to help the refugees through some difficult times. I hope to give them some comfort in their hearts, and I feel that I am doing a very meaningful thing." (Student 09 - from interview data)

Figure 18. Students wrote messages of care onto stones and experimented with dismantling old denim jeans to redesign a second life for them – a textile pocket for some messages.



"It is hope that gathered us here 是希望让我们在这"

Impact of relational nature of project on creative development

Many students articulated impacts of the relational nature of the project on the development of their own creativity in emotional rather than technical terms. The project foregrounded love, care, and understanding as lasting impacts, with students describing how emotional resonance remained more significant than specific techniques. One student articulated this shift through the concept of *seeing* other people as an ethical and relational act, framing textile exchange as a form of mutual recognition rather than symbolic charity.

"My project's name is Kanjian (看见), so it's a Chinese word, but it directly translates to is 'seeing', but it's has more than that, so it's mean seeing, looking at, even includes like peaking or understanding. So why I choose this as a topic is because I did read some messages they left, and put it in the pockets and then it's like it's really touching me that because we have this opportunity to exchange our information or at least even though from there, even from their handwriting, you can tell like their personality or something [...] I do hand embroidered a bit Chinese poetry in English like it's all about love. Yeah. Oh, and why I choose Kanjian seeing is because I got inspired from the language of Kazakh and when I go travel, they teach me that in kazaz 'I love you' actually means 'I see you clearly'." (Student 01 – from interview data)

The same student described how the project reshaped their fundamental understanding of what art and design can do in the world, challenging assumptions about artistic practice as merely self-expressive or symbolic.

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“From the very, very beginning section, I saw Helen's presentation. [...] I actually, I did cry in the first section [...] because that is like the first time I get to know there's some kind of project like this using art and creative way to actually helping the refugee community because I used to see like art is more like a self-expression even though you do express it as a manifesto for some society issue but technically, sometimes it's not actually doing something. [...] but because this project, and especially from the really first session, I know we can actually do something from art and design, so that's pretty exciting for me.” (Student 01 – from interview data)



Figure 19. The inscribed stones and their textile containers were made with the wish that in moments of overwhelm, the stones in their pockets could be squeezed and held, knowing they held the message “you are not forgotten” (Photograph by Helen Storey)

Hope is with us 希望使我们同在”

Others framed fashion and textile practice as a responsibility to make unseen lives visible, suggesting that affective engagement, not skill alone, was central to meaningful design.

“[Fashion and Textile Design] should be have our express of ourselves and maybe think I think it's like responsibility to show to show many of many corners of in this world or in our in our heart, our in our thinking and yes to and make more, make more like the colours to be seen because something in this world is really like. It's not, it should be getting some attention, but it never.” (Student 05 – from interview data)

“I like to the number two and the number four [of the Principles for Climate Racial and Social Justice] [...] Yes, it's really amazing and it makes me realise that the fashion or design or textile maybe can be the most simple language to connect us to connect yes to care for people the specific individuals and leading to peace and love. Yes, I think the human equality and the social and the racial justice is really important.” (Student 05 – from interview data)

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Figure 20. Sequence of a Children's roll out Textile Book "What is love?" - made by the students as they wondered how mothers in camp taught their children to read, perhaps through tactile stories of love? - A rabbit for his carrot – a bird for her nest – a baby, looking into her mother's eyes. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

B.2 Ethical tensions and complexities

What happens when students realise that socially engaged design requires attention, time and responsibility beyond personal progress? 'Pockets of Love' prompted students to confront a shift from self-directed creative development towards making in response to others' lives. For some, this transition produced discomfort and self-critique.

"[this project is] very different because it's more about solving other's problem instead of us. So I feel shameful sometimes because I realise I didn't put much time on it. I just, you know, I I spend most of time on doing my own works like own progress, I realised maybe I'm not like them. The person who is, you know to, you know, very like, stand the point of others. I realised, OK, I I feel oh, I'm selfish sometimes." (Student 02 – from interview data)

Tensions Between Intention, Functionality, and Commercial Viability

For some students, the most significant challenge in creating with and for the Dazleka maker group was not in the technical requirements of this making, but in the value their objects may have in Dazleka. One participant expressed distress over whether their object had any practical meaning for refugees or merely reflected personal imagination, questioning whether they themselves would buy the product.

"Yes, I mean when I made-up my vase, I'm thinking if I can really help them to make a living. Is it just my imagination or my work? But it doesn't have any practical meaning for them. I don't know, so I was trying to make it make it more like easier or make it more commercial then I can help them to sell the products. So I was thinking about if I am the customer, will I buy this, the vase I made? So I was thinking about that, but actually I feel like, oh, it maybe I wouldn't buy it because it's quite it's

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like because the part the shape is not very perfect and also you know the materials has many disadvantages.” (Student 02 – from interview data)



Figure 21. Beautifying materials that will always be around - “The tin cut flowers”
(Photograph by Helen Storey)

A similar concern was brought up by Helen Storey: how does one hold the tension between imagination and survival in such a complex project?

“There are tensions here too, always - we are working with people whose main priority that day is to have food on the table and we are turning up to talk about the use of human imagination and making things together – where we meet, is in the whole notion of what livelihoods are possible and the role creativity can play in imagining new possibilities – but we always have to keep an eye on reality and the complexity of camp based life and the constant battle between abject dependency and freedom”. (Helen Storey)



Figure 22. Woman holding basket bowl she made in Dzaleka
(Photograph by Helen Storey)

This tension between emotional intention and commercial viability generated stress, revealing how ethical design work can expose conflicting values around usefulness, care, and economic logic. Our conversations with staff, partners and students revealed a range of different reactions to the products of similar craft techniques depending on where they were made and who made them. Students expressed a desire to produce work that was economically useful to refugees, while struggling at times to generate work at the quality they would be satisfied to buy.

C. Learnings about brief delivery

The ethical questions raised by students, around reciprocity, privilege, representation, and the limits of making-for-others, did not emerge in abstraction, but were shaped by the conditions under which the project was taught and structured. How the brief was framed, the time allocated, and the degree of openness or constraint all influenced how students understood their role in relation to refugee participants. In this sense, ethics was not only a thematic concern of the project but also embedded in its pedagogical design. Examining the unit structure therefore becomes essential to understanding how ethical awareness was cultivated, challenged, or left unresolved.

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The following section reflects on what aspects of the course design supported ethical engagement, and where clearer scaffolding might better sustain students in navigating the moral complexity of socially engaged making.

Design of brief and positioning within the MA programme

'Pockets of Love' is embedded across the MA curriculum as a bridge between technical training, community engagement, and industry preparation. In the first unit *Material and Process*, students are re-grounded in hand skills as many do not come from a pure textiles background. The unit introduces embroidery, knit, and print while deliberately resisting an immediate reliance on digital machinery:



"[...] because often the word technology within our course, they get wrapped up in, oh, I can just jump on the Tajima machine and digitally and digitally stitch [...] we really want them to combine it with the technology and machinery that exists, and it's kind of the perfect time for that because they are still all getting to know each other as well, so it has an element of fitting in with both the unit and developing community within the course, but also responding to something that isn't just about their material and process briefs. They've got to almost write their own little brief and set themselves a project. And that's a really good preparation for Masters project because our course is 12 months. It's so short we don't have the luxury of time to really integrate like every single element with, a long amount of time, we've just got to kind of put little pockets." (Alice Richardson)

Figure 23: experimental embroideries using sequins cut from tin cans in Dzaleka. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

The project also prepares students for the accelerated MA curriculum and industry-facing work, encouraging them to write their own briefs and balance speed with integrity. Richardson notes how slowing down through craft is increasingly valued by industry:

"[...] And I think the craftsmanship of combining the two, which is equally valid in a way, and that's what you know from working with a lot of luxury brands, they want that craftsmanship that they recognise that actually people will buy into that more so than if it's just made really quickly with cheap materials and not much thought." (Alice Richardson)

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Crucially, this unit design is underpinned by a careful process of contextualisation. Richardson emphasises the need for sensitivity when introducing complex social and geopolitical issues, particularly within a culturally diverse cohort. The project allows understanding to emerge gradually:

“[...] it's been sensitive to them to like helping them understand and not being kind of like slapping them in the face with it, but also allowing them some freedom of like evolving and exploring it for themselves.” (Alice Richardson)

This is achieved by foregrounding refugee-led making, where students are invited to create in response to their own lived conditions. Through ‘Pockets of Love’, the resulting community blanket becomes a bridge back to the classroom, prompting students to reflect on their own experiences of courage, resilience, or difficulty.

“So like, this Pockets of Love. They were scammed. And through that they created this community blanket [...] thinking about ‘what is home?’ to them to bring that back to the students and then get them to consider like an experience in their life. [...]” (Alice Richardson)

Clarity of Deliverables and Project Boundaries



Figure 24. Student presentation of PoL to approx. 100 guests at the Centre for Sustainable Future (CSF) Field Day June 2025 (Photograph C/O CSF)

While the open-ended nature of the brief encouraged experimentation, a few students expressed uncertainty about the scope and intended outcomes of the project. One student struggled to understand

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the boundaries of what could realistically be achieved, particularly in relation to skill transfer and monetisation. They envisioned sharing a skill that could generate income yet later realised that the project structure did not support extended dissemination, training, or sales beyond the timeframe. While the object exchange element of the project was described in the briefing session, another suggested that they did not realise that the project they produced would be taken to Dzaleka and shown to the makers of the Dzaleka Arts Lab there. This indicates that checking that key information about project scope was understood, and providing reminders and further clarity where appropriate, would help students align their ambitions with the project's ethical and practical framework.

Open Brief and Creative Autonomy

In contrast, students also highlighted the less restrictive nature of the brief as a positive aspect of the unit design. The absence of rigid output requirements allowed groups to define their own methodologies, materials, and techniques. For some, this freedom enabled collective decision-making and thematic coherence. For example, adopting patchwork as a shared technique that structured both concept and making.

“Cause this project we don't have really specific things that you need to produce and we need to find out, find it like our own way and to present which kind of things we wanna do. So like for our group, we choose the patchwork as a keyword. Yeah, so is a key technique. Technique through our work.”
(Student 03 – from interview data)

This indicated that creative autonomy functioned as a pedagogical strength, supporting ownership, collaboration, and divergent responses. However, the feedback suggests that such openness works best when balanced with clear framing around expectations, ethical parameters, and practical limits.

Practical and ethical complexities of working in dialogue with refugees

The keystone of this brief is the way it puts students in relationship with makers who are living in the refugee camp in Dzaleka, with Helen Storey and Deepa Patel as the communicating bridge between the two - Creating and holding this relationship comes with practical and ethical complexities that are important to recognise.

One of the themes that Helen and Deepa returned to in our conversations with them was the constantly changing nature of the lived situation in Dzaleka and the potential for the uncertainty to force changes in plans and perspectives in ways that were unpredictable. The reality of working in this way often contrasted sharply with inflexibility, and at times blindness, of the administrative structures (e.g. ethical committees) that seek to govern educational work of this kind.

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Figure 25. The gateway sign to UNHCR ‘DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP’.
(Photograph by Helen Storey)

The team spoke of encountering systems that required certainty about the risks of working situations that were often characterised by uncertainty and unknowability. While these tensions could be difficult for the team to manage, Helen reflected that enabling students to work in limited ways within spaces that were characterised by uncertainty was important, and in doing so both acknowledged the realities that students faced, and created space for new kinds of knowledge and creative development.

“We have a long way to go and much dynamic fathoming to do in real time, to reconcile what ethics means to a Western HE institution and what it means in the precarity of everyday life in Dzaleka, truly, there is so much you can’t predict, don’t see coming, and sometimes, even recognize, yet the skill that we all need to hone fast nowadays, that of how to live and respond to constant uncertainty is the learning and ethics of now.” (Helen Storey)

When witnessing the challenges the refugees were faced with when seeking to secure even their most basic needs, the emotional impacts on Helen and Deepa are often significant, and as we have heard above, cause them to frequently interrogate the value of the work for the refugee partners. When considering this they often reflected however, on the role this work had in enabling refugees to have some visibility, and to be seen and heard, when one of their greatest concerns was that they would be entirely forgotten by the world.

“Since we began this work, back in Jordan in 2016, a message, sometimes said out loud, often held in the tone of conversations, or even held in the tension of a body, was that their greatest fear is to be forgotten – to not make it to the news, to be left behind”. (Helen Storey)

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This creates difficulty for us as an evaluation team based in UAL in the UK in that we have not been able to talk with the Dzaleka Makers in ways that allow us to surface their voices in the same ways as we have the students who are based here. With that in mind we end the findings with their voices. In the face of accelerating uncertainty and the urgency of day-to-day survival, why make anything at all?

“To express ourselves – exercise or use our imagination.

To share love, to show care – whether that be homemaking, cooking or other forms of making and caring for our families.

To have something or a gift to share with the world – something to be known for, something to trade, or sell.

To be in flow, meditate or to relax and be at ease (suspend time).

To create tools to better life in some practical way.

To learn a new skill, or perfect an existing one (10,000 hours, etc).” (the makers of Dzaleka Arts Lab)

Key learnings

‘Pockets of Love’ served as a dynamic platform for intercultural exchange, creative experimentation, and critical reflection. By engaging students with craft and waste materials, it reframed material limitations as opportunities for connection, innovation, and care. Through collaborative making, students and staff collectively explored how creativity—particularly within textile design—can respond to social, environmental, and ethical challenges. The project not only bridged institutional and geographic divides but also imagined learning as a shared, materially grounded process that embraces uncertainty and complexity as integral to transformative education.

For Students

1. Enhancement of Mental Well-being

The student cohort, composed largely of international students from highly developed context such as China, faced the multifaceted challenges of adapting to a new cultural, linguistic, and financial environment. Despite a limited timeframe, the project effectively used craft and waste to reframe material constraints as creative opportunities. This approach not only alleviated individual stress but also fostered collaboration, connection, and mutual understanding—both within the group and beyond institutional and geographical boundaries, including engagement with London-based communities and the Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

2. Development of a Systemic Mindset

The project highlighted the role of creativity, and textile design in particular, as a catalyst for connection, empathy, and systemic thinking. Students learned to navigate between individual profile-building and collective exploration, recognising how design can mediate complex social and ethical issues.

3. Embracing Complexity and Context

Students reflected on the value of ‘holding the tension’, appreciating their own creative skills while acknowledging the material realities faced by refugee collaborators. Contextualised, relational making made complex global issues more tangible, relatable, and personally meaningful.

For Staff

1. Ethically and Materially Challenging—Therefore Transformative

The project proved both challenging and mind-shifting for academic and industry partners. It encouraged staff to think beyond binary frameworks and to engage deeply with nuance and uncertainty. Moreover, it invited critical reflection on the value of low-impact, materially accessible forms of making, prompting a reconsideration of design’s relationship to industry and ethics.

2. Creativity as a Response to Uncertainty

By working within unpredictable administrative structures and geopolitical shifts, the project reinforced creativity as process-led, risk-embracing pedagogy. Rather than resisting uncertainty, staff learned to integrate it as a productive and integral element of design-led education.

What questions does this work raise?

- What is the role of student feedback and evaluation in refining and evolving project briefs?
- How can learning objectives—such as supporting student mental health, developing sustainable international partnerships, and addressing social inequalities—be realistically prioritised within limited time, capacity, and resources?
- What are the most effective engagement strategies for ensuring the project’s findings have meaningful impact across all levels: decolonising the curriculum & researcher roles, student, teaching staff, academic, management, and industry?

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- How can material-led & object-based learning function as a method for implementing Climate, Racial, Social Justice (CRSJ) principles?
- In what ways can tactile communication help foster commons across financial, geopolitical, and cultural divides—such as differing visa statuses, global North-South relations, and resource disparities?
- Should international partnership be seen as a means of redistributing both financial and cultural capital (knowledge, attention, networks)?
- How can project teams effectively manage internal tensions while maintaining alignment with external partners who share common values, and how might such partnerships validate or challenge pre-existing institutional assumptions?

Ethical Concerns

'Pockets of Love', by its very nature, engaged deeply with questions of ethics, particularly around representation, reciprocity, authorship, and the boundaries of socially engaged design. Its cross-cultural and cross-context structure—connecting design students in London with makers living in displacement at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp—required cautious navigation of power dynamics, material & life inequalities, and differing expectations of collaboration.

1. Representation and Voice

A core ethical tension centred on how the experiences of refugee makers were represented and mediated through student work. While the intention was to foster empathy and connection, there remained the risk of reproducing hierarchical narratives—where students, often coming from relative privilege, speaking for rather than with others.

2. Reciprocity and Exchange

The project's exchange model, sending and receiving handmade textile pockets between students and Dzaleka makers, invited reflection on what constitutes fair reciprocity. While emotionally rich, the exchange also revealed asymmetries: differences in access to resources, institutional support, and visibility. Students questioned whether the benefits of participation were equitably distributed, and how future iterations might strengthen mutuality.

3. Material and Contextual Sensitivity

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Working with waste and found materials raised questions about the ethics of aestheticising scarcity. For students used to abundance and digital tools, crafting with limited resources becomes both a creative challenge and a form of ethical education. However, it also required sensitivity to avoid romanticising constraint, especially when collaborating with communities for whom material limitation is an ongoing lived reality.

4. Institutional and Structural Ethics

The project also exposed tensions between institutional imperatives and ethical intentions. Operating within short academic timelines and bureaucratic processes, staff faced challenges in ensuring ethical rigor while maintaining flexibility. Partnership across universities, NGOs, and refugee organisations demanded negotiation of consent, credit, and accountability. These tensions underscored the need for ethical frameworks that are iterative and dialogical, in response to the constant shift in geopolitics.

In the year since the completion of this project, significant geo-political changes within the systems of support and aid for refugees, notably the significant drop in aid funding from the USA and other nations including the UK, has introduced further unpredictability and instability into the lives of refugees. The UNHCR field offices that supported this work have closed. This new reality will require new thinking about how to navigate relationships between these organisations, and a reconfiguration of understanding of what is possible to achieve.

5. Emotional Labor and Care

Finally, ethical engagement extends beyond procedural considerations to encompass emotional labour. Both students and staff navigated feelings of empathy, discomfort, and uncertainty. The project highlighted the need for structured support around these affective dimensions of learning, recognising that emotional risk is both inevitable and educational when engaging with socially and politically charged material.

What comes next?

In light of the significant geo-political upheavals of the last twelve months, which mean that Helen and Deepa will be unable to travel to Dzaleka in the immediate future, a new project brief has been developed that aims to embody the spirit of the 'Pockets of Love' project while adapting for a reality in which the exchange of physical craft objects from students is not possible. Within this context, Helen has established relationships with new project partners: Made 51 (the UNHCR's only commercial partner) and Kibibe, a social enterprise embedded in the Dzaleka refugee camp that employs refugees and produces craft items for sale on a global market.

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Students will respond creatively and collectively to a new craft work that has been created by the makers of the Dzaleka Arts Lab, and a subset of students will take on an additional brief in partnership with Kibebe through which they will exchange their creativity and inspiration in the form of potential new product ideas for their collection (for the full project briefs please see appendices 1 and 2).



Figure 26. The group of students holding their finished work. (Photograph by Helen Storey)



Figure 27. The group of makers in Dzaleka refugee camp. (Photograph by Helen Storey)

Concluding comments and recommendations

In Africa now, we move at the speed of refugee survival, remaining connected to the community leaders whose roles are now supercharged, as they try to contend with an unprecedented loss of protection and basic life resources.

With the recent closure of UNHCR field offices in Malawi, Helen, Deepa and David are responding personally to strategic and practical requests for help. Examples include funding assessments to identify where the most vulnerable in camp are living, (this data was lost with UNHCR's withdrawal) identifying mechanisms for water distribution and paying for coffins.

Whilst a fashion mentoring project continues, whereby academics from local Luanar University gift their expertise to designers in camp and here at London College of Fashion, we are co designing a new project between our students, Dzaleka Arts Lab, UNHCR MADE51 and Kibebe, a local SME, who can provide employment and food for a limited number of women. Our understanding of how to do this work in these new, turbulent, times is both urgent, and emerging. There is much to be learned about how to create and support staff, students, partner organisations, and refugees to work together, while being continents apart.

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There will be a life beyond collapse, and we are using all we have learnt in the last 10 years to slowly and carefully reimagine what can be possible, together.

Appendices

Appendix 1: 'Pockets of Love' Unit briefing

Briefing: **Wednesday January 29th 2025**

"Pockets of Love": Material conversations in making & courage.

Attending: Deepa Patel (collaborative partner and facilitator of working in refugee camps with Helen), David Betteridge, (film maker and block chain entrepreneur), Rose Thompson (UAL Social Purpose Evidence and Evaluation Manager).

Project background:

Prof Helen Storey and Alice Richardson have been working with refugee communities in camps in Malawi and Mozambique in collaboration with UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency). This way of working is founded in Helen's 10-year track record of co creating projects in the world's largest Syrian refugee camp, Zaatari on the Jordan/ Syria border.

In both African camps, craft, tailoring, painting and fashion artefact making is practised and brings together the opportunities for storytelling, community, upskilling and livelihoods.

This brief is based around a creative response to the works created by the refugees on Helen's most recent trip with Deepa Patel and David Betteridge to Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, in November 2024.

The purpose of this project is also to create a new form of reciprocal craft making across different geographies, cultures and life circumstances, as your finished works will be taken back to Dzaleka in May to be shared with the refugees who have gifted us theirs to connect and respond to.

Project context:

The context for making in Dzaleka refugee camp is full of life challenges and practical restriction.

Water is very precious and electricity and the internet often cut off, basic provision for food is supplemented by the World Food Programme, families receive \$5 per month to live off, consequently, people have had to become highly adaptable, resilient, and innovative in how they 'home make' and care for their families. Once a year climate change and the coming of the hurricane season destroys precarious dwellings and brings Malaria into the community, but above all else, how hope for the future manifests is a work of faith and individual courage.

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The artefact:

“Pockets of Love” was created by the makers of the “Dzaleka Arts Lab” (DAL)

This piece was created collectively in response to their chosen theme of ‘Home’ and is a creative response to a local scam they encountered when seeking bails of second-hand clothes to make diverse textile artefacts. The makers in DAL expected to receive enough material to make many artefacts; but the very small useable amount they actually received meant the group had to reimagine what to do.

The pockets were the only plentiful parts available, so many weeks of cutting and sewing began.

The pockets also suggested a novel way to communicate with others, as within each one is a handwritten message from each maker to you.

The finished piece's weight and size also suggested it as a unique blanket, now intended for healing collective trauma and as a vehicle to continue surprise conversations to inspire people across continents.

Your creative response:

Working within the same making conditions as the makers in DAL (ie, don't assume use of electricity, water or internet) create a brief and a material response to the “Pockets of love”.

What skills do you wish to share, or develop a new?

How creative can you be with using only collected and ‘found’ materials around you?

Consider the key making skills each of you already have and use your creative & empathetic thinking to design, a textile for fashion or the home or an artefact. Your primary focus is on low tech making, using only hand craft processes, as you have no electricity and water is scarce.

You can choose if you want to work individually, in pairs, together in small groups, or as a team. Consider using bottle tops, packaging, elements from the nature around you and any other imaginative use of surrounding materials that you have available. Anything discarded is a material resource to play with.

Deadlines:

Wednesday 29th January: Briefing and initial ice-breakers.

Friday 7th February – Review of student ideas, briefs and initial starting points responding to the brief. Students to communicate if they are working individually or in pairs/teams.

Wednesday 26th February - Review and Group Critique with Alice Richardson and Helen Storey.

Friday 7th March - Complete project and group review of work made with Alice Richardson and Helen Storey. (filmed by David?)

Appendix 2: Unit Brief: Material Conversations in Peace, Making, Kindness and Courage

MA Fashion Textiles Technologies Design Competition Brief

Title: *Material Conversations in Peace, Making, Kindness and Courage.*

You are invited to propose the overall design concept for a new collective textile artwork that will be exhibited alongside the piece *Healing Map*, created by a group of refugees in Dzaleka (DAL) Refugee Camp, Malawi. *Healing Map* is a powerful visual mapping of their lived environment, richly embellished with proverbs written in the many languages spoken within their community.

Your task is to respond to this work by designing a complementary “map” that reflects us as a community of makers at LCF: our values, connections, diversity, and shared responsibility to imagine peace, kindness, courage, and care through material practice.

You may work individually or in small teams to submit a **rough design proposal** for the *overall* composition of the collective artwork.

Your design should:

- Explore ideas of **maps and mapping** (emotional maps, material maps, community maps, networks, journeys, borders, traces, or shared territories).
- Reflect the idea of a **collective community of makers**, where each individual voice contributes to a shared whole.
- Respond sensitively to the presence of *Healing Map*, creating a visual and conceptual dialogue rather than a replication.
- Align with the theme:
“Material conversations in peace, making, kindness and courage.”
- Consider the design's final size: 230x260cm

One design will be selected as the overall “map” structure. After this, the full cohort will work in teams to develop and embellish individual rectangular sections of the piece. Each team will:

- Design within the chosen overall map concept
- Include their own **proverbs or statements** responding to peace, making, kindness and courage
- Develop their area through embroidery, surface design, material experimentation and reuse

Submission Requirements

Please submit:

- Rough sketches or visual proposals (hand-drawn or digital)
- A short written explanation (100–200 words) describing:
 - Your mapping idea

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- How it represents community
- How it responds to *Healing Map* and the project theme

Submissions can be made:

- By email to a.kenny@fashion.arts.ac.uk
- Or in person (sketchbook / printout)

Deadline:

28th January, 4:30pm.

This competition is about imagining how textiles can act as a shared language of empathy, connection, and hope. Think of your design as a material conversation between communities, cultures, and ways of making.

Photos of the original 'Healing Map' are attached and a link to view a film about the work is here to share the nature of where the healing map was created and by whom, by way of background and introduction to spirit of this project. You will be shown 'Healing Map' in-person during the briefing on 28th Jan.

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Appendix 3: Additional Key Resources:

Link to 'Vital Signs' interactive report, covering the last 3 years of work in Africa:

www.vital-signs-africa.com

Supporting blogs:

<https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/post/for-our-time-film-2015-2025>

<https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/post/no-refuge-in-a-refugee-camp-by-namad>

<https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/post/the-pockets-of-love-project-dzaleka-arts-lab>

UNHCR Africa project description:

<https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/vital-signs>

Dzaleka Arts Lab site: <https://dzalekaartslab.org>

Times Higher Education career interview: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/campus-talks-social-artist-helen-storey-working-boundary-fashion-and-science>

Green Gowns Award film: <https://www.sustainable-fashion.com>

For further information about this work please contact Prof. Helen Storey at h.storey@fashion.arts.ac.uk