

Centre for Sustainable Fashion

Volume 4.0

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**Green Collar Graduates for the
Future of the Fashion Industry**

June 2009

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**Centre for
Sustainable Fashion**
London College
of Fashion

1. Introduction

UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) play a unique and important role in the education of 'green collar' fashion graduates, to equip them with the tools to create a more sustainable fashion industry. Focusing on the links between employability and sustainability, this research will examine the needs and expectations of fashion industry employers in relation to education in sustainability within fashion related courses.

It is intended that the results of this research will provide HEI courses with the information needed to develop curriculum on fashion related courses, as well as informing curriculum development on other art and design courses.

Phase one of the research focused on an online survey aimed at fashion led businesses within the UK. The results of this survey facilitated the identification of key themes for the telephone interviews of key fashion industry members, which followed as part of phase two. The survey results and notes from the telephone interviews can be found in the appendices one and two.

2. Executive summary

The research found that most fashion companies, including large retailers, take into account social, environmental and ethical factors within their business to the extent of having a policy to reflect this. For many, such factors are central to what the business does.

Despite such credentials, knowledge of key HEI and governmental policies and initiatives is generally limited, with few in particular being able to cite activities within higher education.

With regards to recruitment it was found that employees find it generally important that new graduate recruits are aware of, and have the skills related to, social, environmental and ethical factors, though they do not always require evidence for all roles. Whilst these are considered important attributes in candidate graduates, current knowledge and skills abilities are considered to be average overall. Graduates equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills however are considered an asset to a company and are able to have a positive impact and share their experiences with other employees.

Companies are engaging with HEIs in their recruitment of graduates and recognise the role that work experience and education have in equipping students with the required knowledge and skills for the workplace and the ways in which these can increase graduate employability.

Businesses are enthusiastic about the prospect of working with HEIs more closely, particularly in informing course curriculum in these areas, recognising the benefit it can have both to the next generation of graduates and to the businesses themselves.

3. Terms

For the purposes of this research, the term 'green collar jobs' refers to roles with a positive social, environmental and/or ethical impact within the fashion industry, encompassing fashion retail, design, manufacturing and wholesaling, amongst other non-specific fashion led businesses identified by the survey respondents.

4. Methodology

During 2008 and 2009, 1000 employers within the UK fashion industry were invited to complete the online survey to ascertain the importance of knowledge and skills in ethical, environmental and social issues impacting on the fashion industry, their perception around current levels graduate abilities in these areas and future aspirations from graduates entering into the fashion industry.

A response rate of 5.7 per cent was achieved, well within the accepted guidelines of market research. It is felt that the sample responses are of a high quality and from a variety of sources, making them valuable data for research. The raw data from the survey can be found in Appendix 1 of this report.

Following on from the online survey, the CSF conducted telephone interviews with eleven companies during June 2009. These conversations have been recorded and the notes from each can be found in Appendix 2 of this report.

The survey was independently verified by a consultant market research company and the telephone interviews were conducted according to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct,

5. Key findings

5.1 Respondents

26.3 per cent of respondents to the online survey identified themselves as fashion retailers, 21.1 per cent fashion designers, 5.3 per cent as fashion manufacturers and 3.5 per cent as fashion wholesalers. At 43.9 per cent however, the majority of respondents identified their businesses as 'other'.

Many of the 'Others' were various forms of retailers e.g. online and department stores, as well as the following:

- > Businesses encompassing more than one of the above categories, e.g. fashion designer and retailer
- > Private equity
- > Theatre costume department
- > Textile consultancy
- > Arts media director
- > Writer about sustainable fashion
- > Fair trade certification mark
- > Domestic appliance maker
- > Raw material supplier
- > Ethical fashion network
- > Social enterprise
- > Not-for-profit labelling organisation
- > British Council: promoting fashion design.

Of the respondents, 71.9 per cent felt that the social, environmental and ethical impacts of their company were 'central' to their business. This is also reflected in the number of companies that have a social/environmental/ethical responsibility policy, of which 80.7 per cent say they do. Over half of the respondents (53.6 per cent) also answered yes, that they do have a dedicated social/environmental/ethical responsibility department or personnel, with 40.9 per cent of those that do not currently have such a dedicated department/personnel feeling that it is something that their company might consider for the future.

Similar numbers of businesses rated commitment to social, environmental and ethical factors highly both in terms of importance to the company and to the products they sell. Nevertheless, design and brand value/trust ranked highest in importance to product, and similarly for the business as a whole.

Despite the social, environmental and ethical credentials of many of the companies, awareness of government initiatives and policies was very mixed. All but one of the eleven respondents who felt that they were 'very aware' of government policies and initiatives were companies for which the social, environmental and ethical impact of their company is central to what they do. Conversely however, the majority of those answering 'not very aware' or 'not at all aware' to this question were also from companies for which the social, environmental and ethical impacts of their company are central to what they do, showing that there is a lack of consistency in the knowledge these companies have of government initiatives and policies.

Of those with an awareness of government initiatives, by far the most commonly known was the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Sustainability Clothing Roadmap, followed by the landfill directive and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI).

There was a lower awareness of initiatives taking place within HEIs, with 58.1 per cent of respondents claiming to be 'not very aware' or 'not at all aware'. Those with a good awareness showed greatest awareness for the Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) at London College of Fashion, with a handful also identifying Textiles for Environmental Design (TED) at Chelsea College of Art and Design, and one respondent citing the sustainable fashion course at University College of the Creative Arts (UCCA) and another the SMART initiative at Loughborough University (Sustainable Manufacturing And Reuse/Recycling Technologies). HEI initiatives such as the CSF can however be seen to be having a positive impact on fashion businesses: ethical fashion company Junky Styling commented that "the impact of the centre for sustainable fashion on our industry is immense".

5.2 Recruitment of graduates with knowledge and skills in social, environmental and ethical issues

67.9 per cent of respondent companies recruit new graduates, with 75.9 per cent feeling that it is either 'very important' or 'quite important' that new recruits have knowledge and skills regarding social, environmental and ethical issues.

Ethical fashion companies typically commented that this was vital to their company, but larger well-known businesses also commented on the growing importance of these knowledge and skills in their workforce:

"[] this is a must, and is vitally important to the trust and respect of international businesses."

Nic Galway

Adidas

"It is the backbone to our company."

Elaine McFarlane

Marks and Spencer

"Graduates must be aware of fashion's impact on the world and how designers can influence ranges so they can have a positive effect."

Yvonne Dale

John Lewis Plc

Opinion on whether graduates are well equipped with the required knowledge and skills in the area was mixed however, with half finding them 'good' and just under half being of the opposite opinion and rating them 'poor'. Only 4 per cent found them to be 'very good'. When probed further, respondents found graduates to be average in all areas: design, construction, technical standards, sourcing of materials, working conditions, labour rights, corporate social responsibility, energy reduction, emissions reduction, waste reduction and product use. Graduate knowledge and skills was found to be strongest, though still only just above average, in the areas of design and product use.

The telephone interviews examined graduate knowledge and skills further and found the following:

Design

Most telephone interviewee companies agreed that some awareness and ability is required, but many also felt that this was not always expected. Some commented that these are areas that can be taught on the job, with graduates typically quick to learn. It was acknowledged however that graduates often are not well equipped enough in this area.

Construction and technical standards

Both footwear manufacturer Ecco and ethical clothing design/retail company Bibico agreed that an understanding of and ability with technical skills is 'crucial'. Sainsbury's noted in particular, in relation to construction, that within three to five years it will be imperative that graduates have a good understanding of the supply chain. Others commented that a general awareness is expected, especially of certification and standards.

Sourcing of materials and components

Most interviewees felt that graduates are often lacking in this area. It was noted by one company that students rely on their tutors to source materials for them at university and so many are inexperienced with the research required for sourcing. Also noted as important in this area is the ability to keep up to date with an ever-changing market, as well as graduates recognising the importance of the role of the buyer in the process.

Working conditions and labour rights

It is generally important to companies that graduates have an awareness in this area, though online retailer ASOS commented that whilst knowledge is good, knowing what to do and having the skills to solve the problem can be difficult. This was an area however that some companies felt could be taught on the job.

Reduction of waste, energy and emissions

Where this question was answered, it was felt that graduates should have an awareness, though knowledge should be practical and in line with the specific business. Ecco felt that those with skills and ideas in this area would be able to make a 'positive contribution' to the company, whilst another company felt that awareness in this area was not required, with product being the priority

Product in-use issues (care)

Where this was answered, companies found an awareness to be important, and also commented on the positive impact such knowledge could have on the business.

The interviewees found that in need of most urgent attention from HEIs in equipping graduates with these necessary knowledge and skills is design, followed by technical and production skills. Whilst some interviewees felt that a general awareness of the issues urgently required attention, others felt that this was not necessary and could be taught on the job.

Despite companies feeling the above outlined knowledge and skills to be important, the majority of survey respondents (47.1 per cent) would only ask for evidence of knowledge and skills of social, environmental and ethical issues for certain roles, with only 23.5 per cent requiring evidence for all positions. For those requiring evidence for all roles, a general awareness of the issues was found to be key for most, whilst those requiring evidence for only certain roles asked for this evidence in their recruitment of design and development roles, technical, buying, HR, supply chain and specifically for roles within the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department.

Nevertheless, for graduates equipped with the required skills within a company, the future is bright with 76 per cent of respondent companies feeling that such graduates are able to have a positive impact on the business. Where some graduates may be lacking in skills, a number of the telephone interviewees noted the

increasing awareness that graduates have, along with a passion and enthusiasm about the issues. Indeed, many companies are keen to harness this passion and energy shown by recent graduates, as highlighted in the interviews by ethical clothing company Bibico, as this can be of great benefit to a company, particularly where skills, knowledge and/or passion can be shared with employees.

One respondent commented for example that “it is a USP [unique selling point] and we need to have these skills to take the business forward and differentiate the business.” Jane Shepherdson of Whistles, highlighted this further:

“The more graduates we can bring into the business who have these [social, environmental and ethical] skills, the more it changes the whole culture, and helps to inform the rest of the team.”

5.3 Engagement with HEIs

57.5 per cent of companies contact HEIs directly in the recruitment of graduates, indicating a positive attitude towards the role of HEIs can play in directly supplying graduates to the fashion industry. 62.5 per cent also stated that they contact graduates who have previously worked or interned in their company, demonstrating a higher employability rate for graduates with previous work experience gained during their studies.

“The more graduates we can bring into the business who have these [social, environmental and ethical] skills, the more it changes the whole culture, and helps to inform the rest of the team.”

77 per cent of respondents also felt that they would like the opportunity for their company to inform such course curriculum, in particular with regards to research, design and buying/merchandising, followed by technical skills, CSR and communication. The areas felt to be least in need of input were management and styling/visual merchandising.

In the telephone interviews, Nike emphasised this point, stating the importance of establishing a system of collaboration in order that companies can inform course curriculum. A number of companies identified the importance of courses specifically addressing the issues through dedicated modules. It was felt that collaboration with business could be benefited from within such course modules, with the suggestion that students hear from external speakers from the sustainable fashion field, but also from other industries such as the automotive industry, having made considerable headway in the area, and from which both students and tutors could learn. It was also suggested that students gain direct experience in the field, for example visiting cooperatives and learning first-hand the work being done in these areas.

Overall both survey respondents and telephone interviewees looked upon the prospect of engaging with HEIs was extremely positively. Indeed most of the interviewees already work with HEIs and benefit from such engagement, and many want to do more. The opportunity to share knowledge and initiatives was found to be important with one company also even currently being involved to the extent that they assist on a university offers board.

In terms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for employees within the fashion industry, only 9.3 per cent of respondents to the survey currently use an HEI to deliver training, with textile and garment training cited as an area covered within such training. Those that do not currently use HEIs for training were enthusiastic overall about the prospect of making use of an HEI in the future, though cost was a consideration for some respondents. Of those that did not feel the use of an HEI for training was applicable to them, the reason given by many was that training needs are met adequately in-house. Where training is not currently offered to employees in these areas, 80 per cent of respondents would either definitely or possibly consider offering such training in the future, though none were sure where they would access the training, representing an opportunity for HEIs to engage with businesses for their CPD offer.

6. Summary

The research has shown that companies recognise the important role that HEIs play in the education of green collar graduates overall, as demonstrated in the use currently made of HEIs in the recruitment of graduates for social, environmental and ethical roles, along with the understanding of the role that education and work experience both play in increasing graduate employability.

Whilst most graduates do not currently meet the industry's expectations for having the necessary knowledge or skills, those that do are able to have a positive influence within the industry. Companies require an overall awareness of social, environmental and ethical issues in their recruited graduates to reflect what is, for many, most important to that business.

For graduates to meet these expectations HEIs must ensure that sustainability issues are core to every fashion subject. Furthermore, they must increase their engagement with business, allowing the fashion industry to inform curriculum and be involved in educating and equipping graduates with the necessary knowledge and skills that these businesses require. In turn, green collar graduates will be of great benefit to these companies, influencing their practices with the recent and relevant education they have acquired. Many businesses also recognise the role that HEIs can play in the Continuing Professional Development of their existing workforce and in order to ensure that sustainability becomes central to all businesses, HEIs should harness this.

Greater engagement with businesses can ultimately lead to graduates and employees being equipped with the tools required to create a more sustainable fashion industry.

7. Dissemination

The research was presented at the Fashioning an Ethical Industry annual tutor training day on 7 July 2009 at London College of Fashion.

8. Appendices

To request access to the appendices to this report,
please email sustainability@fashion.arts.ac.uk

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