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*Summary*

*The case study that follows illustrates how curriculum content can be carefully constructed; maximising industry relationships to ensure that graduates make real impact throughout their careers.*

***Key Words employability, transferable skills, relevance of curriculum content, dynamic fashion industry***

***Graduate impact,***

*Introduction*

At the London College of Fashion, a constituent college of the University of the Arts London, our prestigious course, BA (Honours) Fashion Management (BAFM) has over 400 students, approximately120 students in each of the three year groups, and over 40 students out on placement in industry. With a ratio of over eleven applications for each place, the course goes from strength to strength.

The recession has served to sharpen the focus of many institutions on employability. This course views employability as not just about equipping our students with transferable skills but is also about empowering our students to have a positive “can do” attitude.

**Industry Links**

The tutor team work closely with industry at many levels. An industry forum is held regularly to ensure the currency of course content and that our graduates’ skills continue to remain relevant to the workplace.

From the student’s perspective, the industry partnership starts in the first year and builds to become central to the placement year; an optional “sandwich” year in industry or study abroad at the end of the second year which leads to a stand alone qualification,” The Diploma in Professional Studies” .

Every week professionals active in the industry speak to the students on a particular live challenge facing their business; be it refreshing a tired brand or seizing the opportunities offered by mobile commerce. By attending this programme, our first year students are gaining invaluable first hand business awareness from industry professionals in a context that is highly relevant to their studies and future career prospects

**Embedding knowledge and skills**

The key to ensuring that our graduates have impact once out in the workplace centres around the multiple opportunities provided to put their knowledge into practice across each of the stages of their degree. In terms of embedding skills and knowledge the key is “application, application, application”.

In the third term of the first year the students work in small teams on a Fashion Management Project. Currently the theme of this project centres on leveraging the opportunity of the London Olympics for a Sports Fashion Brand. This project gives the students the first opportunity to put into practice the theory they have learned in the first two terms. This is related to buying and merchandising, marketing and retailing product and the associated financial and people resource issues.

*What Our Students say Part One:*

*“All staff have a lot of industry experience and maintain excellent contacts with industry. A lot of what we do is related to real life; in general I am pleased with the course.”*

*“Content of course & extra opportunities the university provides (e.g. internships, visiting speakers).”*

*“The content of the course was excellent. There are a few star lecturers. As a result of the course, I feel I have a wealth of knowledge. I think I would choose it all over again despite its flaws.”*

**Live work based projects**

At the end of their second year of study, students work in pairs, taking on the role of business consultants in a unit entitled Fashion Consultancy Project (FCP). They approach fashion businesses of their choice to work in partnership on live business projects. Clients may be large or small, well known or obscure and the issue to be addressed is a real business problem. Every year the students engage with up to 50 different fashion companies pursuing these projects which range from working with small independent boutiques on their visual merchandising and marketing, to working with larger companies designing and monitoring their websites, through to working with major public limited companies on research into the launch of a new range.

*Student Profile1: Rebecca*

*Rebecca and another student worked with Mio Destino a designer swimwear and underwear brand for their FCP. They helped the brand launch a premium quality mastectomy lingerie range by undertaking research surveying the views and attitudes of over 100 women and breast cancer care nurses. They then worked with the brand through to the launch of the Di Murini range. Rebecca then went on placement to Hong Kong working with supply chain consultants and excelled in her third year graduating with a first class honours degree.*

**Globalisation affects us too**

Interestingly, as Figure 1 shows, more than half the new intake of students enrolling onto BAFM this year are classed as international students, mainly of Asian origin (see Figure 2).This is a slight increase on the course three year average of 50% home and EU and counter to the UAL base of 60.3% home, 13.3% EU and 26.4% international.

**Figure 1: 2010 Intake by Origin Figure 2: 2010 Overseas Intake**

The course team work hard to ensure that the team projects in the first year are comprised of a balance of home/EU and international students. It is important that the nationalities mix and share with each other the benefits of their different cultural perspectives.

Such a diverse cohort produces numerous challenges: group dynamics and a spectrum of language skills being the most prominent. Dedicated language support is embedded throughout the curriculum and additional support provided at key points during the year to overcome some of these key communication issues.

In addition, the course continues to develop links with specific international academic institutions to enable exchanges of students. This serves to ensure a cultural diversity throughout the later years of the course and helps foster debate in final year case study strategy classes. This has been seen recently when focussing on the Uniqlo brand, perspectives have been offered by students with first hand experience of their retail operations in Russia, France and Japan and also in an appreciation of how entrenched the Japanese culture is in the brand and the vision of their leaders.

**A solid foundation**

The learning journey at UAL starts with a common unit in the first term in which students learn underpinning skills, such as research, how to make effective presentations and essay and report writing, key transferable skills that are deemed vital for their academic and career success. The content of this unit is developed and expanded within BAFM with a focus on numeracy skills and ICT confidence, .to ensure that the skills learned underpin students’ future business success.

The teaching team constantly seek to develop the course by introducing new technologies and simulation software such as “Mock Shop” which allows students to design a store in 3D from the lighting and signage to the fixtures and changing rooms. Such technology enhances the learning experience, allowing the students to put theory into practice in a simulation of tasks they will need to tackle in their careers. Many of our course team, the teaching and course management staff, not just visiting tutors, come from industry backgrounds and have themselves experienced the roles to which our students aspire. Our students dream of becoming a Head of Merchandising at Debenhams or Director of Buying of one of the Arcadia brands. They emerge from this degree course well-prepared and well-equipped to begin that career journey.

**Getting the most from a sandwich**

While there has been a UK wide decline in traditional “sandwich” courses, BAFM has retained this important element, which leads to a qualification in its own right: The Diploma in Professional Studies. Through the dedicated role of an Industrial Placement Tutor working closely with colleagues in our Fashion Business Resource Studio, the relationship with industry is formalised to guarantee that every placement benefits both the student and the employer. Placements are sourced across a whole spectrum of fashion companies from Prada, Burberry and Mulberry to Superdry, Marks & Spencer and George at Asda.

A relationship with the business is cemented via formal contracts. A programme of progress visits is undertaken and the students complete progress logs and a placement report.

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| *Student Profile 2:Beth*  *For her second year consultancy project, Beth and her partner worked with Asda performing research leading to the launch of a new range of children’s clothes. Beth then went on placement at Marks and Spencer in 2009 where she worked as Store Manager in a busy outer London shopping centre. Her manager spoke of her as “a valued and respected member of the senior management team”.  She rose to the challenges laid before her and took “real ownership getting a true feeling of accountability for profit and all aspects of people management”. Her personal drive and positive approach were also commended and she will be considered for future opportunities in the business following her final year.* |

The placement year is recommended to all students who satisfy the prerequisite of having excellent studentship credentials and the available financial resources, as it not only advances skills and technical expertise but also engenders confidence and maturity. However, it is recognised that, for varying reasons, placement cannot be the choice of all students. The reasons are often financial as many of the industry placements are unpaid. Whether they are planning to undertake the placement year or continue directly with their studies, all students participate in an extensive ‘preparation for industry’ programme in the second year which includes CV writing, job search skills and selection interview practice.

Placement students see many benefits aside from those which directly relate to their future employability from working in industry for a year. They appreciate the contacts that they make and the opportunity to put into practice the theory they have learned, but also they cite the impact the year away from study makes on their final year. They are not only exposed to issues that could form commercially realistic dissertation topics but are also well versed in coping strategies - from working under pressure and to deadlines - which stand them in good stead for the case study exams. It is true that some find it hard to get back into the role of being a student again, but when we map placement students against final degree class we see an interesting pattern emerge (see figure 3) in which 87% of placement students achieve a 1st or upper second class degree compared to 50% of non-placement students.

**Figure 3: Degree Class Awards BAFM 2010**

**Not only but also**

Employers undoubtedly want graduates with relevant experience of the workplace. In addition to the placement year, our students are encouraged to take internships throughout their studies to enable them to test what they are learning in the workplace and appreciate the relevance of their studies. These graduates are more able to take a proactive approach to their career management as they have already experienced various real life roles and have developed a highly relevant CV.

*What Our Students Say: Part Two*

*“The emphasis on career path planning and the emphasis on the working environment were very good.”*

*“Preparation for industry second to none - e.g. CVs, presentation skills & practical learning. FCP - very enjoyable, preparations, interesting project.”*

*“It’s very career focused and you learn a lot of skills for the workplace.”*

*“Contacts and resources; active encouragement with the placements.”*

**Demonstrating the difference**

Final degree classification is determined largely by an individual dissertation. For several years the course has been fortunate in maintaining a relationship with a major UK fashion retailer Oasis, who sponsors prizes for the best three dissertations. The judges include academic faculty, representatives of the Oasis Board of Directors and a key figure from the fashion trade press (WGSN). Students focus on commercial research underpinned by academic theories, but the end result is that these higher level works are incredibly relevant to the future direction of the fashion industry and without a doubt have real impact. It is no coincidence that the winners of these prizes are often ex-placement students, as these students often present a more mature and commercially aware approach to their final year studies.

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| *Student Profile3: Jessica*  *Jessica spent her placement year at Debenhams, where she excelled in many areas and was valued as a significant part of the women’s wear team. She graduated with a first class degree after writing an excellent dissertation on the significance of the older female consumer. This was judged at the Association of Suppliers to the British Clothing Industry (ASBCI) awards in November 2010 and Jessica was awarded second place. Immediately following the completion of the course, Jessica returned to Debenhams and is now well on the way to completing her training as a trainee assistant buyer in the very important occasion wear and evening wear departments.* |

**Trial by Case Study**

A fashion business case study is the other significant element of the final year assessment. Good marks and often degree class are achieved by the excellent application of models and concepts to the company studied using the case study method. The case study company is selected and the detailed case written each year by a small team of tutors. They highlight relevant current issues faced by that particular company, and the fashion industry in a more holistic sense. Some of the companies which have been used in recent years include, Dior, Next, Burberry, Abercrombie & Fitch, ASOS and this year Uniqlo.

**Why BAFM works**

Modern student life, especially in London, encourages strategic learning out of necessity. The financial pressures coupled with the need to obtain relevant work experience can be a double-edged sword. Many students work long hours in highly pressurised retail environments so they are time poor and often tired and inattentive when it comes to focusing on their academic studies. The use of learning outcomes helps students focus on what they need to achieve so they can target their study. Tutors see this manifest itself as less “reading around” the subject, and the need for them to give clear direction in assignment guidelines as there is no doubt that assessment lies at the heart of the student experience. The learning outcomes and assignments are carefully constructively aligned (Biggs 2006). Every attempt is made to stagger assignment deadlines to avoid assessment overload, inviting surface learning. The constant application of theory to real world scenarios in itself is encouraging a deep approach to learning (Biggs 2006), with the case study ensuring students understand the theories at a relational level, if only in one organisation. Good performance in a case study exam means demonstrating the higher skills (Bloom 1964) of analysis, synthesis, criticism, argument and relational level thinking.

Understanding is personal and not something we can transmit. As tutors we can give students the structure to help them organise the material and make connections (Marton et al 1984). It is what the learner has to do (i.e. learning activities) to construct knowledge that is important; these activities are framed in the context of the real world with anecdotes and examples. How students seek to understand partly depends on their prior knowledge much of which is gained via employment or experience of work. Ramsden’s (2003) conceptualisation of the deep approach as “energetically searching for meaning” is more meaningful than simply “activity,” which could be aimless.

At UAL we believe it is important to complete the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984) in order to develop learning, and to build on knowledge and experience. Reflective tasks are embedded in every unit in Year One so that the benefit is clearly appreciated and reflection becomes an automatic part of learning rather than yet another task. Reflection is most valuable in experiential learning situations such as the placement year, FCP, or where the unit draws on vastly different skills, for example, group work or individual dissertation. The value of reflection on academic content itself lies in the reframing of the subject matter in a personal context to construct meaning and understanding.

We know students look to their tutors to identify their study objectives and criteria for judgement and this in turn encourages dependence. In encouraging independent learners we want them to appreciate how to learn so they can monitor their own work, establish their own criteria and make judgements about their achievements. These “transformative” skills (Harvey & Knight 1996) closely link reflection, deep learning and self-assessment, an essential graduate skill where self-awareness is linked to employability, enabling them to continue on their lifelong learning journey without formal course structure and tutor intervention. Only by knowing what you know and knowing what you don’t, but should know, can you identify the gaps in your learning and take steps to fill them.

Notions of co-operative learning and reciprocity run through the third year of the course. Peer learning is encouraged to ensure the students returning from placement share their experiences of the working environment and, in return, benefit from the students who have come straight from Year 2 where the academic theory may be more accessible in their minds. Boud et al (2001:3) characterise Peer Learning as a “two-way reciprocal learning activity” where there is equal power and mutual benefit for both parties involved. The Peer Learning experience involves the group sharing ideas, experience and knowledge and emphasises interdependent rather than independent learning (Boud et al 2001). This is facilitated in the early stages of Year 3 when Dissertation proposals are discussed in group workshops.

The students are all helping each other by sharing ideas and experiences, putting new perspectives forward to help solve problems. Students are encouraging and enabling each other’s achievement and understanding, collaborating to construct new meaning. In having to explain their ideas to others, they are crystallising their thoughts into words, improving their communication skills and reconstructing their own understanding.

BAFM is not perfect and is hidebound by UAL policy where only the final year counts towards the final degree classification. There is no doubt achievements would be better if a small proportion of Year 2 marks could count towards the degree class; this would reduce the fact that assessment drives learning in the third year.

**Onwards and Upwards**

Students are entering the toughest graduate jobs market in over a decade, with official statistics showing graduate unemployment on the rise. It is no wonder that they see themselves as customers. A “good value for money” degree has to be one that leaves them well-equipped to find work on graduation. To them the Destination of Leavers (DLHE) statistics are far more relevant than institutional scores on student satisfaction surveys and any government requirement to make available statistics on graduate destinations and earnings should be welcomed.

**Figure 4: DLHE BAFM 2009**

Of our class of 2009, figure 4 above shows a healthy employment ratio. Fifteen of our graduates became fashion buyers, fourteen entered other training schemes with several major fashion retailers, eleven took retail management positions and six are employed in marketing roles. Of the employers, four went to work with Marks and Spencer, three with Burberry, two with Harrods, two with Debenhams, two with House of Fraser and one each to Harvey Nichols and John Lewis; there are many others not listed here. Of those employed many were earning salaries in excess of £20 000.

The University of the Arts London has the dubious accolade of featuring in last place on the National Student Survey. That horrifying statistic masks the true performance of the BAFM degree course where scores of a 72% overall satisfaction rating were reported in 2010. 91% of our final year students expressed satisfaction with their final year experience.

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| *Student Profile 4: Sarah*  *Sarah went on placement in Hong Kong in 2007. After writing a first class dissertation on “tweenage” clothing she graduated straight into a buyer’s role at the Disney store. Rapid promotion to head buyer followed and in November 2010 she has been head-hunted again. Her career is certainly on an upward trajectory.* |

As one of the newest collegiate members of the Association of Business Schools we see our graduates leave us as true business school graduates. Indeed many business school scholars envy our position. Our graduates have spent three or possibly four years applying generic management concepts to the highly dynamic fashion industry; it is no wonder they have impact and get off to a flying start in the fashion business world. BAFM will continue to nurture its dialogue with the major graduate employers in the fashion business. We must work in partnership with business to continue to be relevant to our students who are ever more driven by the jobs they aspire to, rather than a love of learning their subject.

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***Editor comments***

***Great! Easy to read, informative, underpinned by stats and pedagogy, with examples of impact both on students on placements and as graduates. Thank you!***

Liz Gee

Liz studied Psychology at the University of Bristol and then went on to train as a Chartered Accountant with one of the “Big Four” firms, Ernst& Young in London. After qualification she moved straight out to industry, joining Internal Audit at The Burton Group (now Arcadia). Several year different Finance Manager roles later as Debenhams plc de-merged from the Group, Liz went on to be Corporate Treasurer. In time, Liz decided it was time for a new challenge at Barclays Bank plc where as a Relationship Director she was responsible for the corporate banking affairs of many retail and wholesale fashion clients including Liberty, Select, Hawes & Curtis and Blue Inc to name just a few. Soon a few hours as a Visiting Lecturer at the London College of Fashion became a full time role as Liz bought her practical finance experience from all types of companies to life in the classroom. Liz is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Heather Pickard

Since leaving the University of Sussex with a Geography degree, Heather Pickard has been involved with the fashion industry for over 25 years. She joined Top Shop as a retail management trainee before moving over to head office and swiftly moved up the career ladder of The Burton Group (now Arcadia) to the role of senior merchandiser. As a Buying and Merchandising controller her fashion and management experience grew at Laura Ashley, Sock Shop and River Island before her career changed direction and she joined the London Institute, now the University of the Arts, London. Her teaching inputs on a variety of courses from Further Education, Undergraduate and Post Graduate draws on her experience of supply chain and Buying and Merchandising. This was utilised in the work she did establishing the curriculum for the Fashion Retail Academy, the first private/ government funded academy devoted to a specific industry sector. Furthermore, her current role as Programme Director, Management, utilises all the management skills acquired in industry. Heather brings a great deal of overall real life experience to all aspects of her work at the London College of Fashion.

