The importance of placement activity in promoting employability skills in fashion and textiles students.

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Abstract

The paper focuses upon, the initial findings of data that was collected over several years from major UK fashion producers, importers, wholesalers and retailers to whom students have been sent for placement experience from the Fashion Studies undergraduate degree at the University of Leeds. This input from significant global brands provides an invaluable source of insight into current trends and issues relating to the appropriateness of contemporary design curricula, the employability of students, the academic value of structured work based learning, and future employer needs within the discipline area. Students’ views on the overall placement experience and how it had altered their perceptions and expectations of employment in design are also discussed.

Keywords: work-based learning, fashion, skills, employability

Introduction

Fashion design continues to be one of the most popular of all subject areas in higher education in the UK. This goes strongly against the reality that there is practically no mass market production base left here and what little remains in Europe is rapidly and irreversibly being eroded by a barrage of unstoppable competition from China and other emerging large scale manufacturing sources. “….and while China and India are turning out four million graduates a year; the UK is turning out just 250,000.” (Leitch, 2006, summary) Yet fashion is a subject that students, in great numbers, wish to study. Its appeal is constant, powerful, democratic and borderless. The issue then arises as to
what are the appropriate abilities that graduates may need, and what is a fast paced, global design market looking for; as many students are now gaining employment worldwide.

A contemporary portfolio of employability skills is now emerging alongside the recognised generic set, which may be at odds with established fashion course content and existing academic practice, and includes such topics as corporate social responsibility, globalised production, post-retail product lifecycle, entrepreneurship and transdisciplinary curricular approaches. With ethical business practice growing in importance, it is essential that students are professionally informed with regard to the prevailing issues and themes relating to globalisation, particularly, ethical business practice, design decisions, economic imperatives, social discourses and environmental realities. All of this debate is set against the backdrop of an unparalleled, worldwide economic downturn that is affecting most sectors of the Fashion and Textiles Industry, reduced consumer spending, diminished market confidence, massive reductions in graduate level opportunities in the commercial design sector and effects of a continuing recession rippling through extended global supply chains and manufacturing bases. As Ramsden states with regard to general successful graduate qualities; we need:

“Graduates who are educated to the standard which the future economy and well being of our nation demands. That standard must enable them to embrace complexity, climate change, different forms of citizenship, and different ways of understanding individuality and cooperation. A student experience that is fit for the future will develop their qualities of flexibility and their sense of obligation to the wider community” (Ramsden, 2009, p3)

Alongside this, recognised employability traits build on the package of transferrable skills that students are expected to engage with and develop during their progression through an undergraduate programme of study. Ensuring that undergraduates can acknowledge and utilise these generic employability skills that are valued by employers alongside their academic achievements is seen as good practice, (The Confederation of British Industry – ‘CBI’, 2007, p10). The acquisition of employability skills should be seen as a continuing process of learning that supports job progression, not just entry into the workforce.

‘Training in the Workplace’ in practice

The work based learning module ‘Training in the Workplace’ has been operational in the School of Design at the University of Leeds for a number of years. This optional module, taken between Levels Two and Three, has grown in popularity over the past few years and now has approximately 70 students per cohort across a range of creative disciplines including fashion, textiles and graphics.
Recognising the need to ensure students experience work related learning, because of the changes that have occurred, and continue to develop, in wider society as well as in higher education itself (Moreland, 2005, p6) the School of Design - University of Leeds has incorporated this optional module into their programmes of study, appreciating the shift in thinking and action on employability away from bolt-on activities towards experiences that are better integrated into the curriculum (Universities UK, 2002, p6). The university believes there are many benefits to obtaining work experience as part of a degree. Most graduate employers expect students to have commercial experience and the process of obtaining a suitable placement gives the student practical application of CV construction, portfolio preparation and interview techniques; offering realistic opportunities to practice job hunting and the world of work, and hopefully then, finding a suitable position on graduation. Work placements give students the chance to experience different commercial roles and therefore aid with career planning for their future, enhance their employability skills, which in turn helps students learn more about themselves and therefore choose an appropriate career. It can also enable the student to apply their academic knowledge to a business setting which can help them see the relevance of their university studies and give them extra incentive and motivation for their final year. Many work placements earn an offer of permanent employment on graduation; large companies often recruit directly from their placement schemes. Work experience enables students to improve their business awareness, get up to date with current practices and discover new directions in their chosen field. Essentially the opportunity to meet people, exchange experiences and network with professionals in their chosen field can really improve the students’ chances of securing a good position on graduation.

Preparing students for work-based learning

Work experience - leading to work-based learning – has proved to be beneficial to students, who have access to such learning through work placements and the like, embedded in their curriculum (Moreland, 2005, p4). Higher education is expected to respond flexibly and rapidly to market changes (Garrick & Usher, 2000) and undergraduate students in general, welcome the opportunity to gain the practical experience necessary to respond to these changes. It is now also accepted that if students want a job, a degree is no longer enough, and with graduates flooding out of UK universities, they are now looking to internships to give them the edge that employers demand (Davis, 2010). To prepare for this challenge, all Leeds students are invited to participate in preparatory workshops organised by the University’s Careers Centre consisting of CV preparation, job search, job applications and interview techniques. Students are also given the opportunity to meet peers who have just returned from their year in the workplace to discuss a range of issues and consider apprehensions, both personal and professional. Concerns regarding where students will live, what type of projects they will be working on, will they be given the opportunity to
meet clients and simple things such as will they be allowed to take holidays, are all talked about. The interaction between these two cohorts has proved beneficial, firstly for students about to embark upon their placement year in terms of information and clarity of purpose, and secondly for returning students in recognition of their achievements. This research attempts to discuss student experiences, the academic value, employer perspective and future needs of structured work based learning within the discipline area.

Methodology

In addition to a small scale literature review relating to work based learning and employability, the primary research focused upon the experiences of two sets of stakeholders – undergraduates from the Fashion & Textile Design degrees at the University of Leeds who had undertaken work placements and employers in fashion, textiles and related industries who had provided undergraduate work placements.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted and the data was then collected between May 2008 and May 2010. It was essentially qualitative data consisting of face to face interviews and a student blog that made up part of the students’ ‘portfolio of evidence’.

A total of 60 undergraduates took part; the students sampled were interviewed during their time on placement and asked to contribute to the blog upon their return to university to complete their degree. A number of the student participants shared their experiences in the form of their ‘Portfolios of Evidence’; these are also used within the assessment criteria for the module.

Additionally, a set of informative interviews, conducted via email, were carried out with 10 organisations that offer undergraduate work related placements to fashion and textiles students. These organisations take an ongoing and active interest in career development for design students from the University of Leeds and were keen to offer their advice and guidance from a student- industry orientated perspective.

Literature Findings

The School of Design at the University of Leeds list a range of transferable skills which the student has to use, develop and reflect upon in their ‘Portfolio of Evidence’ during their time on placement. These transferable skills; self-management and development, managing tasks, communicating clearly and effectively, working with and relating to others, applying knowledge, applying initiative in work problems and reflecting on own
learning outcomes ensure the student develops an understanding of, not only the level they are currently working at, but also recognises, the skills they will need to develop in the future. A willingness to learn and reflect on learning (Martin et al, 2008, p8) and the acquisition of employability skills should be seen as a continuing process of learning that supports job progression, not just entry into the workforce.

Students are expected to have the desired employability skills when they graduate and employers want their employees to have intellectual rigor and to be self-starters (Gibson, 2003, p4). The need to increase employer engagement and build and sustain longer term, closer relationships between higher education and employers is recognised within the 2006 Leitch Report which highlighted the direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment (Leitch, 2006, p25). According to the CBI (2007, p13) employability skills are necessary for success at work – employers expect young people to have the right employability skills, skills which are transferable between jobs and sectors and relevant to all businesses. Their list includes self-management, team working, problem solving, communication, business awareness, customer care, application of numeracy and application of ICT. These commercial skills build on the transferrable skills students are expected to engage with and develop during their studies.

**Employer Findings**

Interactions between businesses and universities are a key feature of the higher education landscape of the 21st century (Solkin, 2010, p1). It has been established that most employers are keen to ensure that they meet the university’s requirements as employers/providers. Nurturing a positive relationship between employers and institutions should help the placement provider and the students acknowledge the educational aims and objectives of the placement (Moreland, 2005, p5). It could also help with key issues such as acceptable hours of work, regular appraisals and opportunities for constructive feedback and financial contributions towards travel and subsistence.

The University of Leeds endeavors to develop employer engagement through work placements by providing guidance to the employer in the form of a ‘Supervisor Handbook’ and informal visits by a university representative. Other administration needs driven by ‘Health and Safety’ legislation including proof of employers’ liability insurance, can sometimes be a challenge to institutions endeavoring to develop and maintain these essential links with employers. Whilst large scale employers normally have these procedures in place these can often be seen as a barrier to engagement by small businesses because of practical time constraints and limited resources to accommodate such measures, especially at short notice. The scheme is considered by the university
to be a three-way partnership between the student, the employer and the University. This partnership is evidenced by feedback gained from employer interviews:

“A fantastic person with a great attitude to work…very keen for her to return when she graduates…” (ASOS.com, 2009)

“…an outstanding member of my department…valuable designer gaining equal respect in the team…outstanding…matured greatly in both confidence and self esteem…” (Cohen & Wilkes, 2009)

“…performed over and above expectations straight away…fitted in and coped immediately…I would re-employ her in an instant…” (Warehouse, 2009).

“…very good attitude to her work…reliable and computer literate…has done an excellent job…I would highly recommend her to any future employer…” (Penfield, 2009).

Employers give students the opportunity to learn and practice skills that are relevant to work and of value in an industry setting. These relationships take time to nurture and develop. This role is challenging for the university, time and resources are constantly being questioned. The university’s mission is to produce outstanding graduates who will make a major impact on global society, ‘Learning and Teaching’ strategic priorities for 2010-11 is ‘to devise and implement the strategy to develop students’ employability and career options’. Gaining feedback such as this ensures work related placements remain on the curriculum.

**Fostering business-university collaboration**

Gibson (2003, p4) sees employability as a quality, not merely a set of activities and skills, and poses the key question; “What else do students need to make them more employable as well as communication, numeracy and critical analysis?” Different employers need graduates who have different capabilities, (The Council for Industry and Higher Education-‘CIHE’, 2007, p4) and businesses value those who are creative and can think innovatively as general feedback from employers suggest:

“Stayed on task, was a pleasure to work with, worked independently yet was a team player…” (Cohen & Wilks, 2009)

“Has learnt to deal with a flexible working environment …it is important to be pro-active and use initiative in a small design team and that requires a broad spectrum of different skills…” (Monsoon, 2008)
It is probable therefore, that those students who are able to develop a range of transferable and employability skills will be able to apply them in a range of business contexts as well as becoming more enterprising and entrepreneurial (CIHE, 2007, p4). It is important to take a wide definition of enterprise. An enterprising person is innovative, creative, efficient at problem solving and takes managed risks. To be enterprising, an individual does not need to set up a business – they can also work creatively for the benefit of an organisation (CBI, 2007, p22).

Employers also recognised the limitations of the students “…. initially struggling with some elements of the work but was always enthusiastic and willing to learn...” (ASOS.com, 2009). This willingness to learn and a willingness to work both independently and as part of a team were skills which employers valued highly in undergraduates. These transferable skills are highlighted by one employer interviewee:

“The student demonstrated the ability to multi-task, manage their time efficiently; work well both independently and as part of a team, as well as find creative and resourceful solutions in different situations...” (Smiffy’s, 2009).

Employers value undergraduates who are adaptable and demonstrate a range of skills which are not just subject related. The feedback from a varied range of employers gained via email interviews was that above all else the qualities that they most valued in students were the abilities to function and integrate well into existing teams and maintain an attitude that was professional, motivated and positive. Conversely, at the level of post that the majority of these students were holding, the issues of enhanced creativity or sophisticated market awareness were not key priorities for employers.

**Student Feedback**

Students can encounter a range of challenges when organising and carrying out placements, especially ones sited abroad. Financial constraints, family commitments and travelling are especially testing. If placements are unpaid students also have to manage additional part-time work, and this can place added stress on the overall student experience. Access to students’ ‘Portfolio of Evidence’ records some of these financial worries with some students undertaking two or three part time jobs so they can work in the organisation of their choice. This is often with a small and medium enterprise (SME), charity work or a freelance designer where payment is either nonexistent or very low. Data collected through the blog gives insightful and sometimes surprising views of their experiences in the workplace. These experiences of work based learning demonstrate how students develop an understanding about work, work practices, time management, strengths, weaknesses, career goals and learning about the self (Moreland, 2005, p8).
“I felt that I became a valued member of the team…I learnt to be more confident in my abilities and learnt to listen before jumping head first…I realise that work often consists of the things that you don't like doing…I learnt that I am capable of being independent and solving problems…” (Fashion Design blog, 2010)

“I have gained some great experiences this year and will be sad to leave…made some great contacts and friends. My writing skills have vastly improved and I have developed a strong understanding of the industry…it has surpassed all my expectations…” (Textile Design blog, 2010)

“Developed and learnt more skills than I could have possibly envisaged…personally I have developed confidence, time keeping skills, organisational abilities and learnt to cope under pressure…invaluable experience in a successful learning environment…” (Fashion Design blog, 2010)

A career in Fashion and Textiles is often characterised by SMEs, sole traders, self employment, temporary contracts, freelancing positions and flexible working hours. Managing this type of career, demands many skills and personal attributes, including self-management, flexibility, resilience, negotiation, problem solving, motivation and entrepreneurship amongst many others. In their ‘Portfolio of Evidence’ these learning processes and reflective practices enable students to find out more about their current strengths and development needs (Moreland, 2005, p8), in order to make sense of future career possibilities and become flexible learners able to respond and adapt to a wide range of situations.

Students list a range of formal and informal outcomes in their reflective journals contained within their ‘Portfolio of Evidence:’

“Gain contacts - work with professionals - gain ‘real’ feedback - being part of a professional environment - more driven” (Fashion Design, 2008).

“Improve skills - learn new skills - update skills - better understanding of industry - gain a broader outlook – varied work” (Textile Design, 2008).

“Gain confidence - work outside comfort zone - learn to appreciate criticism - get good advice” (Fashion Design, 2009).

Data collected in these journals suggests that managing moving to new cities and countries, working in a fast paced environment where individuals learn to sharpen time management skills and develop a professional working routine, allow students to become flexible, productive learners. It is interesting to note that students who are given responsibility, quickly realise their strengths and weaknesses both personally and
professionally, and research has shown that this helps them to decide which sector of the industry they wish to work in, no longer, purely being mark orientated at an award level, but making career choices in an informed and professional manner after a sustained period of externalised, work related learning.

Unsurprisingly interviews with students demonstrated that the main deciding factor concerning which area to work in was the reality of being offered a job after graduation. After work related placements many students were offered a permanent position once they graduated. However, it is interesting to note that the student does not always accept this initial offer, preferring instead to exploit their network of contacts gained during their work placement year.

Conclusion

This is an early piece of research and it is anticipated that the findings from this investigation, and further investigations, will be disseminated through a range of publications, workshops, curricular materials and conference papers. It has been broadly demonstrated that work placements provide an ideal bridge between education, professional practice, the commercial environment and an ever changing curriculum. The feedback that constantly came from a varied range of employers, was that above all else, the qualities that they regularly, most valued in students, were the abilities to function and integrate well into existing teams and to conduct themselves in all aspects of their role in a professional, motivated and mature manner. At the level of post that the majority of these students were holding, the issue of enhanced creativity or sophisticated market awareness was not a key priority for employers. It is also clear from interviews conducted with the placement providers that these standard employability skills, such as time management, organisation, planning, prioritising, attitude and above all the ability to function as part of a team with sound interpersonal skills are of genuine value within the commercial sector for creative undergraduates.

“There is a lack of differentiation between the courses available at college. They tend to be, generally speaking about training designers and the design industry is a much broader industry than just that of a practicing designer. The practicing designer is supported by people that understand project management, account management, research, semiotics, consumer behaviour, finance, the whole way and nature that design actually fits into the broader and wider world. Now we don’t necessarily have university courses that take that on board.” (Worthington: 2007, p6)

There are therefore important messages to be considered when constructing or revising fashion based curriculum in trying to embed generic established employability skills into a programme of study whilst maintaining an appropriate balance with subject specific and contemporary, creative skill sets. Clearly it is this holistic approach to employability,
both general and discipline orientated that design companies are most attracted to when selecting students for placement or future employment opportunities. This would support the overall development of different approaches to the preparation of students ready to embark upon placement experiences, and considering how best to embed core skills throughout awards.

References


Placement Employers

ASOS.com: Online fashion retailer supplying men’s and women’s wear. London

Cohen & Wilkes International Ltd: Apparel supplier offering comprehensive supply chain solutions to major fashion retail brands. Leeds

Monsoon: High street and online women’s fashion label. London

Penfield USA: Designers and suppliers of casual outerwear for men and women. London

Smiffy’s: Designers and wholesalers of fancy dress costumes. Leeds

Warehouse: High street and online women’s fashion label. London