

Fashioning an Ethical Industry

The fashion industry plays a major role in global trade. How can fashion students be encouraged to consider ethical issues when they enter the industry?

Fashioning an Ethical Industry (FEI) works with universities and colleges which offer fashion-related courses to encourage them to integrate ethical issues related to garment manufacture in their teaching.

What did they want to achieve?

'For many of the garment workers employed in the fashion industry the abuse of human rights is a day to day reality', says Hannah Higginson, FEI's joint project coordinator. FEI was set up to inform and inspire the next generation of industry players in the UK to want to raise standards for garment workers in the fashion industry of the future. The ultimate aim of the project is to embed ethical issues into the curriculum of all fashion courses across the UK.

How did they set about doing this?

FEI runs student workshops at individual universities, which have so far focused on the impact of purchasing practices on working conditions, using a role-play to encourage students to think about how a last minute design change, or the constant quest for lower prices, impact on conditions for workers. FEI also runs training events for fashion tutors that have covered purchasing practices and the role of Multi Stakeholder Initiatives in improving conditions. These sessions give participants the opportunity to hear from industry specialists. Resource packs are distributed to university libraries and films are loaned to tutors. Variations in course content have made it impossible to develop generic study units, so the project works with individual tutors to develop specific units.

An annual project conference brings fashion students and tutors together with representatives from conventional and 'alternative' fashion retailers, industry specialists, trade unions and workers' organisations from the 'South' to discuss how the vision of an ethical fashion industry could become a reality. The speakers from China, Cambodia and Nicaragua had particular impact. *'The power of their personal stories, depth of knowledge and passion really engaged the fashion students and tutors'* says Hannah.

In response to requests from tutors and students, FEI has set up a website containing reports, factsheets, interviews, films and images about the global garment industry. The website's

Frequently Asked Questions and factsheets have greatly reduced the number of repetitive information requests. A monthly e-bulletin keeps readers informed of new resources, forthcoming events and student opportunities and keeps people up-to-date with developments in the industry. An FEI Myspace and Facebook have also been established.

How well did they achieve their aims?

In its second year, the project surpassed expectations and became nationally recognised. Curriculum development is taking place in a number of universities and tutors are bringing workers' rights into their teaching through films, resources and training accessed through FEI. FEI has been a catalyst for the development of a centre for sustainability at London College of Fashion, an elective module and two masters degrees in 'ethical' fashion and has been involved in introducing social responsibility issues into universities and colleges across the UK. There has been significant fashion media coverage of the project.

What do they plan to do next?

Having concentrated on 'buying' courses in Year two, FEI plan next to focus on fashion marketing and promotion. They will offer training sessions to students about to go on work placements to help them gain deeper understanding of issues faced by garment workers and efforts to improve conditions. They will build stronger links with industry and education bodies and speak at events run by other organisations to promote the project more widely. The project will also produce a tutor manual that will provide educators with ideas about how to teach corporate social responsibility issues and a student magazine, which will be full of ideas of things that students can do to learn about how they could fashion a more ethical industry.



“After this workshop I will make an effort to help change the way the industry operates when I gain a job after graduating”

International Fashion Business student
Nottingham Trent University



Reflections:

- The diverse voices of those affected by unequal global power relationships can have a powerful role in education, with the caveat that no one person's experience and views are expected to represent a whole country or continent.
- Learning about positive initiatives that are already happening can be particularly motivating to students' sense that they can make a difference.
- Work between NGOs and educational institutions is most effective when the issues are embedded in the curriculum rather than seen as an additional extra.
- Targeting education projects on those who are going to be decision makers is an important way to bring about change.

In Sri Lanka - as in many other countries - minimum wage legislation has proven to be increasingly inadequate as it fails to provide sufficient income to keep the average family above defined poverty levels.

ALARM: A living wage for all



“One of the most informative and inspiring elements of the FEI project was a meeting with trade unionists from China. I had not realised how important the right of [freedom of] association was to garment workers – it opened my eyes to the limitations of codes of conduct as a tool for monitoring working conditions.”

Fashion Tutor who attended the China Blue Film event.

More information:

- Fashioning an Ethical Industry website: www.fashioninganethicalindustry.org.

