



## 8th International DEFSA Conference 2019

Hosted by Cape Peninsula University of Technology and IIE Vega School.

### DESIGNED FUTURES

Design educators interrogating the future of design knowledge, research and education.

#### **An Unknowable Future: The significance of fashion entrepreneurship education in preparing young designers for the industry**

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#### **Abstract**

*One of the most significant challenges faced by South Africans is the high youth unemployment rate. Government and the private sector are unable to create sufficient job opportunities to accommodate young graduates. Entrepreneurship is a significant solution in a climate of unstable economy, limited job security and abundant social issues. It is debated whether entrepreneurship can be taught. Some researchers believe entrepreneurs are born and cannot be made. However, employers seek people with specialised skills, quick learners who can easily shift from one role to another (Majithia 2017), competing on a global level. Fashion entrepreneurship education could help prepare students for real business situations, whether as entrepreneurs or responsive employees.*

*Fashion design students have the necessary knowledge and technical skills required to design and make fashion products (Burke 2013), and fashion entrepreneurship should follow naturally. However, Blomfield and Trade (2002) argue that fashion design students do not know how to use their creativity for commercial gain. These young designers struggle to promote and sell their products to the envisaged market. This paper gives voice to fashion alumni, who believe their education should have prepared them for business.*

*A successful fashion entrepreneur must have personal entrepreneurial qualities to identify prospects in a fast-paced industry (Burke 2013). This paper explores how these characteristics can be embedded in the curriculum to equip students with necessary skills needed to compete in an unknowable future. Objectives of a fashion education programme should match socio-economic needs of its context. It is necessary for academia to adapt to best practices to establish a viable and sustainable future (Palomo-Lovinski & Faerm 2014). In sharing the voices of students past and present, this research aims to contribute to the discussions and development of a sustainable and effective Fashion Entrepreneurship curriculum within a South African context.*

**Keywords:** Fashion, fashion entrepreneurship, fashion entrepreneurship education

## Introduction

Entrepreneurship education is a large, expanding and important field in today's economy, and one of the growing fields of education globally (Sirelkhathim & Gangi 2015). In spite of the belief that entrepreneurs are born and not made, there is an increasing amount of research that recognises the significance of entrepreneurship education. Some academics believe entrepreneurial traits are 'born' rather than developed. However, research acknowledges that an entrepreneurial attitude can be fostered by entrepreneurial practise, ethos and setting (Jenny Shi, Chen, Kate Gifford & Jin 2012). Entrepreneurship education, therefore, benefits students to be more innovative and confident in whatever they carry out. An entrepreneurial mindset relates to managing one's own life, being creative in any working activity, and establishing and expanding a business successfully. This paper, therefore, argues that entrepreneurship education can inspire entrepreneurial potential.

In the United Kingdom (UK), universities are responding to the call from the government to inspire students to consider entrepreneurship as a potential career path (Carey & Naudin 2006). The demand for entrepreneurship education has also been promoted by student needs, as students want to study courses ranging from "business planning and start-up, to entrepreneurial finance and technology management" (Wilson, Vyakarnam, Volkmann, Mariotti & Rabuzzi 2009, p. 19). Today's graduates identify work as something that allows for self-development and self-expression (Arnett 2004). With current social and economic challenges, choosing a career path has profound significance for today's young graduates. They are graduating during great economic challenges, and this has made them choose careers that are more than just giving a salary, but something creative that will allow innovation. The career choices graduates make still require certain skills and traits that will allow them to be competitive and survive in an ever-changing world.

Due to high unemployment rates among the youth, Higher Institutions of Learning (HEIs) in South Africa are facing an academic change. A call made by the Department of Higher Education for all HEIs to include entrepreneurship modules to their existing programmes. Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Economic Development and Tourism, Mike Mabuyakhulu (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development and Tourism 2015) supports the call made by the Department of Higher Education, which highlights a variety of opportunities and recommendations for unemployed graduates through entrepreneurship. Carey and Naudin (2006) state that, in so doing, HEIs will not only produce graduates who will look for jobs but possible entrepreneurs that will contribute to the growth of the newly-emerging, knowledge-based economy by starting businesses. Wilson et al. (2009) assert that schools and HEIs should be required to develop students to work in a self-motivated, fast-moving entrepreneurial and global environment. Lazenby and Machaba (2011) report that while education is significant for promoting and stimulating intelligence, graduates appear to be hesitant when it comes to business starters and taking necessary risks and venturing into the unknown. This study highlights the importance of a tailor-made entrepreneurship curriculum for a specific programme that speaks directly to a specific industry rather than a generic curriculum.

## The business education in a fashion programme

Although design education is mostly the main part of fashion education, design is only a small part of the wider fashion industry (Gale 2011). Entrepreneurship in the fashion industry is practicable and important, as the fashion business sector comprises of many small, medium, micro enterprises (SMMEs). In the context of creative education, many design programmes have recently included basic entrepreneurship skills (Mills 2012). Rao and Joshi (2010) state that a paradigm shift is necessary to focus on entrepreneurial education custom-made to suit

various disciplines. Meaning, there is no one size fits all, and fashion education must be aligned to benefit the increasing professionalisation of the sector and social-economic needs.

Rao and Joshi (2010) indicate that fashion and apparel design is a 'specialised' sector. Therefore, it requires entrepreneurs to be taught fashion entrepreneurship and fashion entrepreneurial characteristics. Research studies advise that formal education positively influence entrepreneurial activities. However, there is also literature to the contrary (Lazenby & Machaba 2011). Fashion designers are at an advantage of starting their own businesses compared to those in other professions, as they possess technical skills required to design, make and sell their products (Burke 2013). However, many up-coming designers do not know how to monetise their creativity (Blomfield & Trade 2002). This has contributed to debate among academics, business professionals and stakeholders on the quality of entrepreneurship education, whether entrepreneurship can be taught or practised and how the content is delivered. What should be taught in these programmes and how to teach them have been highlighted by many researchers (Sirelkhatim & Gangi 2015).

The core function of HEIs is to offer quality education to future leaders and develop high-level technical capacities that support economic growth (World Bank 1994). However, how does one know whether a programme's objective is being carried out successfully? Blenkin, Kelly and Edwards (1992) suggest that a curriculum must be revised and tested frequently to guarantee that it responds to changes occurring in society so that it can benefit the educational process.

According to Jamieson (cited in Rao & Joshi 2010, p. 2), entrepreneurial education for fashion and apparel design, must be planned in relation to 1) entrepreneurial education of the enterprise; 2) entrepreneurial education for the enterprise; and 3) entrepreneurial education through the enterprise. Furthermore, Rao and Joshi (2010) suggest fashion entrepreneurship should develop students to have entrepreneurship traits that should include the ability to pioneer their designs and create a unique style, consistent and new, the ability to manage the process of communication on which fashion depends and the ability to manage strategic and marketing issues. While appreciating Jamieson's (1984) model, this paper argues that a curriculum must guarantee that it reacts to changes occurring globally and importantly socio-economic circumstances so that it can benefit the educational development.

These debates prompted an investigation into whether the Durban University of Technology's (DUT) Fashion entrepreneurship curriculum for the Fashion and Textiles Department does meet its intended objectives or not, and whether it has considered the changing social-economic needs. According to Faerm (2012), these needs comprise of an industry that is fluctuating at an extraordinarily high level. With a different group of students, a new set of skills and abilities are demanded by today's economy and the world at large. This paper brings attention to the future of fashion entrepreneurship through fashion entrepreneurship education and current professional practices amid speculations into an uncertain future. The question is, are our students ready for the unknowable change? Are we equipping our students to be able to solve problems, survive and thrive in this changing world? To answer these questions, this study examined alumni perceptions of the efficacy of entrepreneurship education within the fashion business studies curriculum of the universities of technology (UoT).

## The fashion business studies module

The Fashion Entrepreneurship module at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) is referred to as a Business Studies module in the annual programme offering. Influenced by the socio-economic needs, the Durban University of Technology's Fashion and Textiles Department included the Business Studies (BS) module in its programme at the beginning of

2002. The motivation to introduce fashion entrepreneurship education resulted from noticing a rapid change globally. There was a need and demand for entrepreneurship knowledge and skills, as students had little to no understanding of how to start and run a fashion business. Initially, the Fashion and Textiles Department outsourced the services from the university's Business Studies Unit, and subsequently from the Entrepreneurial Studies and Management Department. This meant that the Fashion programme focused on basic entrepreneurial knowledge. The outsourced departments lacked the contextual knowledge of the fashion business world, presenting generic content fashion students could not use. As the demand for fashion-specific entrepreneurial knowledge and skills grew, the department designed its own Business Studies curriculum, tailored to entrepreneurship opportunities for the fashion and textile industry's needs. The developed module targets more than just fashion students interested in starting their businesses. All registered students must complete the module, developing critical skills that will allow students to be competitive, creative and innovative.

Currently, the Business Studies module is taught at all three levels of a National Diploma in Fashion. Further to this, Business Studies is offered as a module in the Bachelor of Technology in Fashion qualification. The following modules are part of the undergraduate qualification:

**Business Skills 1:** Introduction to fashion business terminology, problem solving, and going through the fashion business sector to understand different roles within a fashion business and relevant responsibilities.

**Business Studies 2:** Students do two modules, Marketing and Merchandising (module 1) and Business Skills (module 2). In module 2, students are exposed to practical, creative and innovative elements of entrepreneurship. Students research the gap for setting up a new fashion or fashion-related business in South Africa. In Marketing and Merchandising, students are introduced to market research and the marketing mix-elements, among other things.

**Business Studies 3:** Comprised of two modules, Business Creation (module 1) and Business Management (module 2). The Business Creation module introduces students to financial management and related activities for a small business. It includes the role of sourcing finance in supporting the functional areas of business and fosters an understanding of how financial decisions themselves can create value. By doing this module, students are given basic knowledge that will help them build a better financial future for their business. The module also looks at the importance of promotion and branding in a small business. Business Management aims to assist students in understanding the human resources functions of business by addressing recruitment and hiring, labour relations and leadership skills. It also teaches students to develop the ability to multitask and build confidence in managing a business.

Furthermore, the module aims to aid students' understanding of the Operations Management (OM) and the design and production processes in an apparel/footwear/retail organisation. Operations Management refers to the administration of business practices, activities, decisions and responsibilities of managing the resources (technologies, systems and personnel) (Nieuwenhuizen 2004) which are dedicated to the production and delivery of products and services. This is achieved through work-integrated learning (WIL), which aims at placing students in workplaces within the apparel/footwear/retail organisations to extend the students' learning within the programme.

**BTech:** This module offers a higher level of study with more theoretical and academic content. Each student submits a business research report based on the area of interest.

Since the revision and implementation of the changes in the early 2000s to the Business Studies syllabus, the curriculum has not been tested to see if it actually meets its desired outcomes (including developing designers that can understand broader contexts, contribute

to social entrepreneurship, come up with creative and innovative new products and ideas, and rethink new business methods, think critically and solve problems). The long-standing views of entrepreneurship education and its purpose in the fashion design industry requires critical rethinking to be able to prepare students for the uncertain future. This study explored the perceptions and lived experiences of alumni who graduated between 2002 and 2012 having covered the Business Studies curriculum 1) to establish whether or not the knowledge and skills acquired were sufficient for the fashion alumni to start a fashion enterprise in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Durban metropolitan region; 2) to determine whether the content of the Business Studies curriculum increased the likelihood of fashion students pursuing entrepreneurship; and 3) to establish whether or not the curriculum needed to be revised.

## Research design and methodology

A sample of nine fashion alumni entrepreneurs of the Durban University of Technology was selected by using the purposive sampling method. The criteria used to select the suitable criteria comprised of:

- fashion alumni who graduated from Durban University of Technology, between 2002 and 2012; and
- fashion alumni who had formally set up and run a fashion business for a minimum of two years, operating within the Durban metropolitan region.

These criteria aimed to select appropriate individuals who could provide insight into whether the Business Studies curriculum was practically meeting its objectives. Data was collected through semi-structured personal and in-depth interviews that consisted of open-ended questions as it gave me the opportunity to create probing questions that allowed for clarity in answers during the conversations. An interview schedule was developed as a guide to ensure consistency across the interviews. This instrument was tailored to collect a large amount of data on alumni perceptions of how the Business Studies module affected their entrepreneurship knowledge, skills, expertise, graduate attributes (outcomes) and engagement in other additional educational or professional endeavours.

## Findings and discussion

Of the participants running fashion businesses, 89% were females, and 11% were males. Of the nine graduates, 56% graduated in 2009, and 44% graduated between 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2007. 100% of the participants started their businesses from scratch, which is very important in the creative industry, as one is judged by originality to be able to maintain the brand.

Participants were asked whether the Business Studies module triggered an interest in starting a business. Of the nine respondents, 11% (one participant) started a business while studying towards a National Diploma. The remaining 89% (eight participants) only started their businesses after graduation, and some had to secure jobs for financial reasons and experience first, and then started their businesses while working. This can be interpreted to mean that most graduates were not business-ready immediately after graduation or during the course of study due to lack of finance or lack of business skills, hence the need for experience. Interestingly, participants I, D, H and G, enrolled in the fashion programme, never intending to look for formal employment. Participant H stated, "I have always wanted to be an independent business owner, to have the freedom, both financially and creatively. To build and contribute to my own dream instead of working for an established company and not being

creatively fulfilled". Participant I said, "this has been a lifelong dream. I have always wanted to employ local labour and pay them fairly for their skill".

Business professionals that mentor up-coming entrepreneurs argue that graduates lack business skills such as bookkeeping, accounting and finance literacy. When asked whether the Business Studies module did provide them with financial skills and bookkeeping skills required to start and run a fashion business. Participant I mentioned she had to learn on the way through her business and seeking mentorship from other business owners. Another participant G recognised that she had limited knowledge, and went on to take a business course that she found to be an immense help. "Having parents that own a financial planning business and they were, and still are, extremely helpful regarding advice, and general business tips and financial growth". Participant G and H are in a partnership business and answered by saying, "the module was somehow relevant as the assignments were related to fashion, however, during the years at tech they never took the subject seriously because of how it was taught". However, they both knew that business studies were important for career success.

This requires academics and curriculum developers to consider entrepreneurship needs and demands as required by the changing industry. How entrepreneurship is taught needs immense attention. This requires educators to find new ways to teach and move away from traditional teaching and learning. According to Rasmussen and Sørheim (2006, p. 1), action-orientated learning has multiple objectives, such as "educating entrepreneurs, establishing new ventures, and commercialising university research". This promotes that learning by doing is the most suitable method for teaching and learning entrepreneurship for today's student. This is because action learning helps students deal with real-world problems and adopt many of the entrepreneurship education principles" (Rao & Joshi 2010).

This study argues the issue of a generalised entrepreneurship curriculum, as there is a need for tailored, programme-specific curricula. Participants were asked whether the content of the curriculum was adequately structured to help them gain the skills and knowledge required by the fashion business industry. Participant D enrolled in the fashion programme already having decided that she wanted to own a fashion business. She said, "Luckily I had already known that entrepreneurship was the way for me as I owned a sewing machine at the age of 16 and by the time I was in my second year of study I started making bridal gowns". Participant B stated that "the fashion programme as a whole prepared students for employment". In the words of participant F, "it was all about getting a job within the industry, but not about using my creativity to make money out of it". Participant C concurred with F, saying, "We were mostly encouraged to take the employment route; it was never about starting a business". Participant B stated, "the Business Studies syllabus was not fashion related. However, the assignments were linked to fashion". She further explained that "the module was taught by an outsider [outside the Fashion and Textiles Department]. If the lecturer had a fashion background it would have helped". What this study has proved is that the background of the educator plays a role in teaching and learning, as teaching methodologies play a role in how students learn. In agreement with Rao and Joshi (2010), the study believes that educators of fashion entrepreneurship must be familiar with entrepreneurship requirements of the fashion and apparel design sector. The syllabus has since been structured to focus on fashion/clothing entrepreneurship opportunities to meet the student and fashion business needs, taught by Fashion and Textiles lecturers instead of outsourced. Joshi (2010) point out that fashion and apparel design is a 'specialised' sector. Therefore, it requires fashion students to be taught fashion-specific entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial characteristics.

In trying to understand whether the Business Studies curriculum had gaps that needed to be considered in terms of required skills by the fashion business industry, Participant I indicated that, "the skill to be able to network and build a list of suppliers in the industry is just as important as it took me time to establish contacts". "The knowledge of labour laws, patents,

CCMA policies, brand and social media understanding and marketing knowledge was as essential". Interestingly, the results showed that 56% of the participants responded by saying that costing and pricing or accounting and bookkeeping was also crucial. It became evident that there was a gap in the manner in which the Business Studies syllabus was structured.

The current syllabus does address the terminology and basics of the human resources function of a business. However, the bookkeeping knowledge and labour law gap suggested by participants requires a specialist in the field of labour law and auditing/accounting. Auditing/accounting are necessary skills required to financially manage a business and requires a specialist in the field, hence the importance of industry collaborations that allow guest speakers who are professionals in certain fields, to be invited to speak on certain topics. In agreeing with (Rasmussena & Sørheim 2006), this would also allow the module to be more action-orientated rather than focusing on the traditional teaching. Currently, the Fashion and Textiles Department puts emphasis on industry collaborations and guest lectures, however, the important thing is to identify critical topics within the syllabus for all levels of study. The revised Business Studies curriculum is in the process of review to determine whether it has been effectively revised to meet the changing students' needs and whether it does prepare fashion graduates for the changing world.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Since the initial changes to the 'basic' Business Studies curriculum, the Fashion and Textiles Department has recently reviewed the curriculum and made further changes. The Fashion and Textiles Department reviewed the content, structure, duration, approach and delivery style of the Business Studies and made changes appropriate for a fashion student. These changes included the review of the module content, delivery and relevance in relation to the South African socio-economic needs and motivated by the students themselves through the subject evaluation questionnaire surveys (SEQs), the industry players and in relation to the South African socio-economic needs. The review process has been improved by involving the advisory board to review and give feedback on the curriculum based on fashion industry needs and economic needs in general. The advisory board includes industry players with various specialties within the industry and fashion entrepreneurs that happen to be alumni of the Fashion and Textiles Department of the university of technology.

The findings have provided some thought-provoking insights that, in the researcher's opinion, will contribute to the body of knowledge about and a better understanding of fashion entrepreneurship education. Given the fact that the South African Department of Higher Education is in support of entrepreneurship education, and has developed policies and introduced programmes for the promotion of this initiative at higher education institutions. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inform the effective execution of those developmental programmes within higher education institutions offering Fashion education. It is also anticipated that curriculum developers will find the study relevant to their objectives in that there could be lessons to be learned from the results.

Based on the findings, considering some best practices recommendations for Fashion Entrepreneurship education are:

### ***Entrepreneurship education content***

The elements of an entrepreneurial personality that are essential for a fashion enterprise and must be included in the curriculum are creativity, innovation, identifying opportunities in the changing world and practice of entrepreneurship. Identifying innovative prospects and making them happen at calculated risks should also be the emphasis. This would prepare the students for the fashion business industry.

### **Business content**

The Business Studies content should broadly include topics such as marketing and branding, trend research, market research, finance and human resources, design and product cycle. This will help the students develop the skills base to encourage more enterprising behaviour and gain an integrated and holistic business management perspective.

### **Legal aspects**

The legal aspects should be included, such as intellectual property rights, employment legislation, insurance and labour acts. This would prepare the students to face various challenges in the process of creating and sustaining the enterprise.

### **Communication skills**

Making sales is the primary challenge. This is based on the ability to convince potential clients. A fashion and apparel entrepreneur should be in a position to persuade the buyers that the products would satisfy their needs. This requires the fashion and apparel entrepreneur to have good communication skills.

Whether entrepreneurs are born or made has raised much attention and debate. There are many studies on this concern. However, there are not many answers and even more questions (Lazenby & Machaba 2011). In conclusion, the impression of this study is that entrepreneurship education has to play a role in enhancing entrepreneurial knowledge, traits and capabilities preparing graduates for tomorrow. For entrepreneurship education to achieve its goals, the curriculum should be tailored to each discipline and not generalised. There is no one-size-fits-all curriculum.

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