



CONNECT Project: A global learning experience on sustainability in the fashion industry

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The Connect Project provided a collaborative educational experience that debated the challenges of environmental impacts, over-consumption and ethics in the global apparel industry. Bringing together four universities in the United States, United Kingdom, China and Australia in a live project, it engaged academics, students and professionals from around the world in participatory learning toward the importance of sustainable innovation. It had the following problem based learning objectives:

- To generate interest and enquiry surrounding the issues, which affect the global apparel industry, the environment in which we live and our future.
- To better understand the scope and scale of the problems and challenges that face the apparel industry in creating a global sustainable future.
- To encourage students to become active in the campaign for a sustainable future.

An academic and student representative from each university, forming a team of eight, participated in a carefully planned schedule of global events. In visiting each country the representatives of the Connect Project (1) explored local, small and medium sized firms and not-for-profit organizations that champion social responsibility, upcycling, supply-chain transparency and new fashion business models and (2) presented at sustainability events in each university that invited practitioners, entrepreneurs and the academic and student participants to offer perspectives on the importance of sustainability for the apparel industry and debate its future.

The Connect Project's design was based on Problem Based Learning (PBL) creating a focused learning experience grounded on exploring sustainable innovation in the context of the apparel industry. The project's objectives formed the driving questions for the project. When organizing their schedules and events during the visits to each of the participating Universities, constructive investigations were formed toward structuring the students learning within each socio-cultural and market context. This offered the environment in which the students learned about sustainable innovation by recording their experiences and working on understanding and reflecting on what they had learned by posting on the projects blog. This was guided by the

academic working with the student on the project providing guidance, input and challenging students thinking and analysis of the problems they discovered.

Students were required to present during the conference events in each country, putting forward their ideas and perspectives as part of exploring the debates in which they were engaged. The problem based structure and the nature of the experiences in the project provided rich sources of inspiration that challenged students' current thinking and made them reflect on their own actions as consumers of fashion and future industry professionals. Their ownership of the problems they had recognized and investigated provided the intrinsic motivations to continue autonomous learning toward their work and to critically evaluate the design and business practices of the apparel industry. The realism and experiences that the project facilitated created an innovative and unique learning environment which rapidly generated a student centered and student created learning resource in the form of a Connect Project specific web page that can now be used as a platform to scale up participation and the wide dissemination of the projects outcomes. The following illustrates the learning process:



The results of the project were recorded and disseminated by all participants through social media, daily blogging and a specific 'Connect' webpage that collated a rich variety of examples and perspectives on sustainable innovation. The examples uploaded to the webpage have generated a rich learning resource that can now be used to develop teaching resources and create a learning collaborative for an even larger audience in continuing the discussion. Student and faculty feedback on this project has been overwhelmingly positive. Student suggestions for future collaborations include doing hands on work and having the project provide a solution-based issue. We plan on continuing this global project in the future in a variety of formats. Future Connect Projects will continue to upload student research and experiences as well as industry based information to the webpage and continue to enhance this joint university resource.