The importance of skills and economic knowledges in the education of fashion designers – entrepreneurs

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Abstract

In European countries, fashion design is respectable part of growing and fast developing creative industry. It is understood that education provides fashion designers good knowledge of textile materials, clothing construction, patternmaking, draping, etc., but since many of them continue their careers as entrepreneurs, we hypothesize that specific skills and certain economic knowledge might be left out. In this paper, the importance of specific economic knowledge, when educating fashion designers in Croatia, is detected and explained. Content analysis was used to detect presence of economic courses/subjects in world's best-ranked fashion schools. For determining the most important economic knowledge, primary data sources are used (surveys completed by Croatian fashion designers). To specify all economic knowledge they find useful, 31 economic topics divided in nine groups were evaluated. For knowledge evaluation, Likert five point scale is used and data are analyzed in SPSS 21.

Key words: *fashion designers, education, specific knowledge and skills*

1. The study background

There is a growing awareness across the Europe of the importance of higher education to develop a knowledge-based economy. In such a climate, European universities are increasingly required to produce highly mobile graduates that are able to respond to the ever-changing needs of the contemporary workplace (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Possa, 2006, p. 355). Support and encouragement to significant changes is provided by different EU institutions through a wide range regulatives and initiatives. In the Recommendation 2006/962/EC regarding the key competences for lifelong learning (European Parliament, 2006, p. 10), significant place have occupied the following soft skills: learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression. Furthermore, as a part of strategic framework for European cooperation in Education and training 2020 (so called "ET 2020"), European Commission has published a policy document related to the investigation of skills. A common vision from that document, as well as from the number of related ones, is that certain soft skills, such as creativity, the ability to think laterally, adaptability and other, will be valued more than the specific knowledge that educational institutions have traditionally taught. In a number of studies and panels, serious concerns have been expressed regarding an increasingly wide gap between the skills of graduates and the demands of the work environment (King, 2003, p. 5). Therefore, the main

question that each educational subject should place is whether the hard skills that students obtain during their formal education are complimented by so called soft skills and whether the specific knowledge, such as economic knowledge, has been left out or insufficiently represented. Recently, intensive efforts of scientist are given to the classification of soft skills, skills' metrics and initiatives to encourage the official recognition. A number of EU projects, such as ModES, MASS, E-QUA, NESSIE and CREDNET, focus on soft skills and its popularisation among students, participants of VET or employed/unemployed individuals. At the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Textile Technology the importance of soft skills and their incorporation into the curricula is recognized. The Faculty follows the European trend of research on soft skills through two European projects that are focused on the soft skills grading and teaching creativity for engineers – TECRINO and GRASS. The project TECRINO directly addresses the key competence "learning to learn" from the Recommendation 2006/962/EC, by creating not only a problem solving attitude, but also the ability of students to handle obstacles and a rapidly changing environment. The GRASS project focuses at the grading of soft skills and development of high-quality digital credentials to map learners' achievements in developing and demonstrating soft skills.

A pilot study, aiming to gain insight into the perceptions of students regarding the most important soft skills for their future employment, is conducted within the GRASS project (Salopek Cubric et al., p. 1). In the survey participated three groups of students that study at the Faculty of Textile Technology - textile technologists (dominantly technical courses in their programme), textile designers (dominantly artistic courses in their programme) and industrial designers (both technical and artistic courses in the programme). The students were asked to grade the importance of a number of listed soft skills for their future employment, as well as to assess the level of their own current capabilities regarding each named soft skill. Among a number of soft skills listed, students gave the highest grades to the importance of creativity/innovation and communication. Regarding the skills that are important for entrepreneurs in fashion and textile business, managerial skills were highly rated (average grade 4.37 on Likert scale 1-5). They were followed by teamwork, leadership and conflict management. It is interesting to point out the fact that students of fashion design gave considerably lower grades regarding importance of each soft skill that other students that participated in the survey. The outcome of the study, that is certainly important for the process of the curriculum renewal, is the fact that students of all observed groups were somewhat restrained in assessing the level of their own current capabilities regarding each soft skill.

2. Approach and Methodology

Research presented in this paper was divided into two phases. Defined research objective for the first phase was: *to check if knowledge that can be gained through economic topics (social science*) *is included in fashion designers education at the best Fashion Schools worldwide.* This research focused at the best ten Fashion Schools worldwide according to The Wesley Consultant group ranking. For achieving the first research object, content analysis was used. Content analysis is defined as the method of collecting primary data (Tkalac Verčić, Sinčić Ćorić & Pološki Vokić, 2010, p. 91).

The second phase of this research had another research objective: *to detect which specific economic topic is considered as the most useful (important) for Croatian fashion designers who operate on Croatian market.* For achieving second research object, questionnaire was designed. It contained 31 economic topics divided into nine groups (*Basic economic knowledge in general, Marketing, Organisation and Management, Trade, Accounting, Finance, Entrepreneurship, Project proposals writing, Human resource management*). Nine groups with total of 31 topics were proposed after interviewing ten fashion designers and detecting their basic needs for economic knowledge while operating as individual entrepreneurs. Interviews were conducted from March to May 2014. Questionnaires were gathered by "divide and collect" method (Tkalac Verčić, Sinčić Ćorić & Pološki Vokić, 2010, p. 103). Fashion designers evaluated proposed topics with 1-5 Likert point scale (where: 1- I do not find this knowledge useful; 5- it is very useful). In this research, 18 surveys were divided to Croatian fashion designers. Total of 15 questionnaires were completed properly. By answers provided, the most important economic topics were detected when educating fashion designers (in Croatia) as potential future entrepreneurs. The data are analyzed in SPSS 21.

3. Findings

Presence of economic related courses/subjects at top ten Fashion Schools defined by The Wesley Consultant group is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Economic knowledge in fashion designer education – Top ten Fashion Schools

FASHION SCHOOL	PROGRAMS	ECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE
CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS (London, England)	Fashion: Fashion Design Menswear; Fashion Design Womenswear; Fashion Print; Fashion Design with Knitwear; Fashion Design with Marketing	□□□
PARSONS, THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN (New York, USA)	Fashion Design, Fashion Studies, Fashion Marketing	yes
BUNKA FASHION COLLEGE/BUNKA WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY (Tokyo, Japan)	Fashion Creation, Fashion Technology, Marketing, Accessories & Textiles	□□□
ANTWERP ROYAL ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS (Antwerp, Belgium)	Fashion Design	no*
FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (FIT) (New York, USA)	Fashion design Apparel, Fashion design Art	□□□
ECOLE DE LA CHAMBRE SYNDICALE (Paris, France)	Fashion Design & Technique	□□□
ISTITUTO MARANGONI (Milan, Italy–also London, Paris campuses)	Fashion Design, Fashion Business, Fashion Buying, Brand Management and Fashion Promotion	□□□

ESMOD (Paris, France plus 21 schools in 14 countries)	Fashion Design, Fashion Business Strategy and Communication	□□□
UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER (London, England)	Fashion Buying Management, Fashion Design, Fashion Merchandise Management	yes
ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART (London, England)	Fashion Menswear, Fashion Womenswear, Textiles	* mix**

Source: http://wesleyconsultants.com/top-50-fashion-schools/ (25.08.2014.)

*answers provided via e-mail

**course as Portfolio presentation (that focuses at communication skills), can be considered as course from social scences, as well as art

According to the information gained through web pages of all Fashion Schools presented in Table 1, as well as e-mails sent at their correspondence addresses, it could be concluded that almost all top ten Fashion Schools (90%) have economic knowledge included in fashion designers education process. In the most cases, they also provide economic/market oriented fashion programs where they educate future fashion managers, fashion marketing experts, workshop managers, art directors (career opportunities, http://www.esmod.com/en/content/fashion-design-undergraduate-program).

On the basis of the conducted survey, the best-ranked economic topics from the perspective of Croatian fashion designers are presented in Table 2. The results include the mean value of grades given for each named topic, as well as the standard deviation of grades.

Table 2. Importance of specific economic topics in fashion designer education

TOPIC	Mean	Standard deviation
Basic economic knowledge in general	2.93	1.033
Basic of macroeconomics	2.80	1.014
Basics of microeconomics	2.93	.961
Basic calculations of economic indicators/Business performance	3.67	.976
Basics of market, supply and demand functioning	4.27	.799
Marketing	4.33	.617
Promotion	4.40	.632
Public relations	4.47	.516
Market research	4.33	.617
Marketing plan writing	4.00	.655
Organisation and Management	4.07	.594
Business organisation	4.20	.561
Fashion event management	4.13	.834
Business strategies	3.93	.884
Trade	3.93	.799
Price calculation	4.00	.655

Product distribution	3.87	.990
Wholesales	3.47	1.246
Retail	4.07	.799
Accounting	3.53	.834
Finance	3.87	.640
Financial plan	3.80	.676
Cost management	4.00	.655
Entrepreneurship	4.07	.704
Business set up	4.13	.915
Business plan	4.27	.704
Project proposals writing	3.73	1.100
Human resource management	4.13	.743
CV and applications writing	3.40	.986
Workers employment	3.93	.458
Total	**3.88**	**.888**

As it can be seen from the Table 2, all proposed economic topics are deemed as useful to Croatian fashion designers (total mean 3.88). Best-evaluated topics group is Marketing (4.33), followed by Organisation and Management & Entrepreneurship (both 4.07). Topics that are considered as useful and are best-evaluated are Public relations (4.47), followed by Promotion (4.40), Market research (4.33), Business plan (4.27), Business organisation (4.20), Fashion event management & Business set up (both 4.13), Price calculation (4.0), Marketing plan writing (4.0), Workers employment & Business strategies (both 3.93), Product distribution (3.87), Financial plan (3.80) and Basic calculations of economic indicators/Business performance (3.67). The highest deviation within the grades is obtained for the Wholesales (Sd = 1,25) and project proposals writing (Sd = 1,10).

4. Concluding remarks

Inclusion of economic knowledges through courses/subjects in fashion designers education in world best-ranked fashion schools refers to the understanding of importance of economic knowledges in fashion designers education. From this research, it can be concluded that they find economic knowledges important and useful in their careers. Not surprisingly, the best-ranked topic is Public Relations, as it is crucial in communication between fashion designer and its customers/market.

The presented results indicate a base for future improvements in education of fashion designers. In this sense, the outcomes of the study may be valuable for the creators of new curricula, both for University of Zagreb Faculty of Textile Technology (the main center for fashion designers education in Croatia), and for all private schools that educate fashion designers (for example Profokus, Callegari, etc.).

It also needs to be outlined that conducted study has several limitations that will be taken into account for the future research. Namely, the intention is to expand the sample data in order to get more reliable final conclusions, as well as to apply the qualitative approach (case study

analysis) in the discussion of results. Due to the fact that mobility of both teachers and students increases, it would be interesting to conduct the same or similar study with the participation of fashion designers outside Croatia and to perceive their perspective.

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