

# CLASS IS IN SESSION

*LEARNING IS A NEVER-ENDING PROCESS, AND THIS COULD NOT BE TRUER FOR TODAY'S PROFESSIONALS IN THE DENIM SECTOR. WITH A PEEK INTO THE CLASSROOMS OF SOME INSTITUTIONS, WE SOUGHT INSIGHT INTO HOW UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES ARE PREPARING STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY DENIM STUDENTS, FOR THE INDUSTRY OF TODAY AND TOMORROW.*

Text **Travis Rice**



DENIM STUDENTS AT FIDM, CALIFORNIA

**E**stablished as purveyors of knowledge, institutions of higher education have the responsibility to school the future of the industry in a manner that ensures alignment with real-world needs, and yet balanced with the proficiency to take on some of the multitude of foreseen and unforeseen challenges. A sentiment echoed by trend forecaster Lidewij Edelkoort during Munich Fabric Start at the end of 2019, with her adamant accusation that fashion, and thus fashion education, is the most old-fashioned in the world. In her words, after recalling this past year's graduation shows, "Education needs to take wind of what is new, needs to take a position about the future," going on to say that "education needs to start with a whole new principle of new fibers and new textiles." This got us wondering, what is then the state of denim education?

## Don't forget to cite your sources

It is worth noting that fashion education extends beyond design students and their graduation shows, with majors and specializations built around various facets of the industry. From science to sourcing and manufacturing to marketing it's all on offer. While some programs

may lack the fiber focus, students majoring in The Business of Denim at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising (FIDM) in California, begin right at the source.

"With the fabric dictating all aspects of a denim garment including aesthetics, character, wash and fit, we want students to begin the program learning the complexities of selecting denim textiles." These are the words of Amanda Starling, FIDM department chair and The Business of Denim program lead. Students begin with investigating varieties of cotton, other fibers and yarn development and then move on to dyeing and textile production. While only the start of their program, it is perhaps not surprising that the holistic approach of dirt-to-jean is a highly requested learning outcome from the industry.

Only a few hours further north at the University of California, Davis in the Department of Textiles, a graduate program is booming with students from all over the world conducting research on textile science. "My students are science students with an interest in

fashion. They understand how to read a peer-reviewed article and make intelligent arguments," says Joanne Brasch PhD. As a lecturer at UC Davis and special project manager for the California Product Stewardship Council, Brasch underlines the fundamental role the program's research has in raising public awareness and acquiring vital data on the environmental impact of the clothing industry. Using real news, current events, environmental issues and politics related to the global supply-chain, students examine and investigate their favorite brands all the way down to the fiber and polymer manufacturing. Example topics include functional fabric finishes, with silver coatings as a hot topic a few years ago and PFAS being this year's hot topic.

Perhaps the larger issue at hand is that the current situation sees fashion education mimicking the industry. Where design gets the spotlight and the rest are merely viewed as supporting actors. Graduation shows get the press, while peer-reviewed research gets passed over. Let's not forget who is truly making the show happen. It is time fashion cited its sources. Maybe then people will begin to see fashion with every fiber of their being.

## Experience education

What became overly apparent is that the denim industry has fully embraced education. With all the programs we spoke to; FIDM, Amsterdam Fashion Institute, University of California Davis & the Jean School in Amsterdam employing a "reality school" approach—a concept where the curriculum mirrors and engages with the fashion industry for real life experiences. For Jo Watson, lecturer at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute and one of the coordinators of the institute's Denim Minor, this request even comes about from the industry. "They want the students to have a greater understanding and enthusiasm for the whole supply chain, not just the front end, the designing, retailing and marketing of products." Watson's experience is that the denim industry is most often willing to share and has a passion to educate. In particular for her students, who are following a 20 week go-to-market calendar, it is the "live" moments with industry stakeholders that students gain the most insights. Whether touring a mill, creating circular strategies, conducting labor-complaint case studies with the Fair Wear Foundation, or pitching final concept presentations to brands such as Denham, Kings of Indigo and G-Star, the realness of the curriculum brings many a lightbulb moment.

## Environ-mental

An added benefit of the "reality school" approach is that as industry innovations and sustainable concepts are introduced, coursework is quickly adapted to incorporate these new technologies and methodologies. With the luxury of learning and teaching in what can only be described as a design denim lab, the Jean School in Amsterdam was founded on the motto Towards a Brighter Blue. Mira Copini, co-creator and coordinator of the Jean School, highlights its focus on circular production and sustainability: "We aim for a different mindset with our students, we want them to be critical and creative thinkers." In the age and rage of sustainable fashion, digitization has become one such important skill fashion students need to acquire, and for Copini, their focus on digital skills, amongst others, is important "as [they] think there will be new jobs created like digital fashion designers and production on demand." A sentiment echoed by their Amsterdam colleagues at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute where students and teachers stay on the digital cutting edge.

Back in California, both institutions focus on circularity, low-impact production and producer responsibility through the implementation of comprehensive curriculums. "In 2016, our textbook moved the sustainability chapter from the back of the book to chapter 4 in the beginning," says Brasch. Even the students themselves are "starting the course with more background knowledge on environmental problems, climate change, social injustices, etc." Corporate responsibility is no longer a mere add-on to the curriculum, but rather integrated into every aspect and topic.

## Closing the Say-Do Gap

It is very clear that for students to understand the complexities of the fashion supply chain, they need to be exposed and interact with industry stakeholders from all levels and areas. Fortunately, as this article highlights, programs exist that not only introduce students to the multifaceted world of market decisions but immerse them in a manner where choices bear weight, where aesthetics and ethics merge and where the very fibers of their beloved brands are put under a microscope. Denim education is closing the say-do gap, turning denim into an industry of solutions. While still a work in progress, what we can do is ensure that we the industry give the spotlight to the scientists and designers alike. Giving all our "fashion" students, and the greater public, real and holistic insights into the making of our clothes. >



AMFI STUDENTS VISITING JEANOLOGIA AND RECOVER IN VALENCIA