

Response to the Independent Commission on Lifelong Learning call for evidence: Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Development

About Skillfast-UK

Skillfast-UK is the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for fashion and textiles. As an SSC, we are licensed by the Governments of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales to help employers to compete in a global market, by ensuring access to a skilled workforce, capable of delivering added-value products and services. We do this through articulating employer skills needs and influencing education and training provision.

Introduction

We are pleased to respond to this consultation, which raises an issue of increasing importance to the fashion and textiles sector. This response should be taken in the context of our previous two responses to the enquiry, about work-place learning and technological change.

We have interpreted sustainable development to include concerns about eradicating human rights abuses in the supply chain as well as the pressing environmental issues. As a Sector Skills Council (SSC) our interest is in the specific knowledge and skills required to ensure that businesses in the fashion and textiles sector become increasingly sustainable, we will not therefore be commenting on ways to raise general awareness of this important issue.

Sustainability and the fashion and textiles sector

The sustainability agenda has a high profile in all four of the UK governments, amongst business and amongst consumers, and its importance is growing rapidly. It has an impact on all parts of the fashion and textiles supply chain, with implications for skills and knowledge requirements, particularly at a higher level. The challenge for the sector is to respond effectively to regulations whilst at the same time grasping the market opportunities created by increased public concern about sustainability issues. The key issues facing the sector are as follows:

- Resource efficiency; for example there is a high level of energy and water consumption involved in textile production but also in laundering processes
- Pollution; tanners, dyers and scourers produce significant quantities of effluent waste and dry cleaners are reliant on solvents, for example
- 'Total life cycle' issues; which involve making companies responsible for products during their entire life span from production through to disposal, recycling or re-use
- Social justice and equity issues; relating to concerns about low wages, long hours and dangerous working conditions. These concerns apply to the employees of overseas manufacturers involved in supplying sector companies in the UK but also to some parts of the UK sector, particularly those firms operating in the informal economy
- Innovation; there are opportunities to capitalise on demand from end-use markets for materials that promote improved environmental performance e.g. use of composites in aerospace sector as a means of reducing fuel consumption.

The issue already has a high profile within the sector with innovative brands and courses designed to address the challenges. For example Marks and Spencer's Plan A programme is encouraging demand for sustainably produced clothes throughout the supply chain and global carpet manufacturer Interfaceflor has made its low-carbon cool carpet a key part of its marketing strategy. Leading University programmes such as the London College of Fashion have made sustainability issues part of their undergraduate degree programme, although there is a need for other universities to 'catch-up'. It is likely that sustainability concerns will become a more mainstream part of courses at lower levels in the future.

Young people give consideration to sustainability issues when making career choices. As an SSC Information Advice and Guidance is an important part of our role. It is important that the information we supply to careers guidance practitioners highlights the opportunities to make a positive difference within the fashion and textiles sector and the skills required to do so.

The role of lifelong learning

Upskilling the current workforce

The education and training system for fashion and textiles, as for other sectors, needs to rapidly develop an increased focus on skills and knowledge for sustainability. As noted in the section above this applies to mainstream full-time provision as much as lifelong learning. However, lifelong learning has a particularly crucial role to play in this area because the need for rapid change leads to a need to upskill the current workforce.

Business support / skills brokerage



The Government's business support and skills brokerage services potentially have an important role to play in meeting sustainability goals. However, these services have historically not always been popular with employers.

Across the UK there is now a move to connect business support and skills brokerage and make the system much more simple to access and understand. Governments need to ensure that sustainability skills are a joined up part of the offer, rather than something companies have to go looking for specifically.

In addition it is essential that the broker who businesses speak to is familiar with their sector of the economy and therefore able to recommend relevant sector-specific support or training. We have plans to work with the government in both Wales and England to improve brokers' sectoral knowledge.

Governments funding support is in many cases tied to qualifications rather than outcomes. Funding support for sustainability needs to be tied to interventions which generate a measurable increase in both sustainability and profitability in order to attract business involvement. The lack of a relevant qualification should not be a limiting factor.

Governments funding support is often aimed at lower level qualifications, with businesses or employers expected to make a greater contribution at higher skill levels. This policy needs careful consideration in the area of sustainability where benefits to the wider society will often predominate.

Our research with sector employers shows that learning from other businesses through 'benchmarking groups' is very popular with businesses. Government should fund capacity development and facilitation for this sort of learning.

University Continuing Professional Development

Much of the 'sustainability knowledge' that sector businesses require exists within Higher Education (HE), and HE Continuing Professional Development has a great deal to offer if it can be made accessible and relevant to businesses.

The North West (of England) Higher Level Skills Pathfinder is based on a model where businesses skills needs are identified by SSCs and teaching is commissioned to meet that need. This is then offered by a regional grouping of HE and Further Education (FE) which makes it available across the region. A similar model for sustainability skills would be advantageous in other parts of the UK.

Foundation Degrees

Foundation Degrees are a new qualification which offer a blend of academic work based learning at degree level that suits students and employers. They are step forward in meeting employers' skills needs and were designed to enable employers to study for a relevant degree whilst working full time.



Unfortunately too much foundation degree provision is still on a traditional full time model. In order to meet their potential Foundation Degrees need to have a flexible and modular structure, with delivery times that allow participation from those working full time. Their content must also genuinely based on work-place skills needs.

Foundation Degrees have the potential to play a role in meeting the sector sustainability skills needs, but this would require further development of their content.

Government policy, sustainability and skills in the sector

Government policy on sustainability needs to place greater emphasis on the skills required to meet the sustainability challenges. Action on sustainability skills needs to be co-ordinated between government departments and SSCs. In order for SSCs to rise to this challenge effectively specific funding for research into current and likely future requirements is necessary.

Conclusion

If anything in this document raises any comments or questions, then please do not hesitate to contact Tim Sunderland, Policy Manager on 0113 2399627 or tim_sunderland@skillfast-uk.org

