

Ten Practical Ways To Decolonise The Fashion Curriculum.

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Report 005

The Council for International African Fashion Education (CIAFE) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the standards of Fashion Education in Africa, with the aim to close the knowledge and skills gap, create opportunities for future talent and contribute to economic growth. Our aim is also to support decolonising the fashion curriculum within European and North American institutions.

CIAFE is committed to uniting the fashion industry and academia. Through ensuring educators stay on top of the changing skills due to technological advancements, macro-environmental changes, and cultural influences for the purpose that the curriculum meets industry standards.

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Introduction

Decolonisation has been a pressing topic of discussion over the last few years, particularly within education circles. There is an overwhelming need to redress previous inequalities in various areas of contemporary education, with fashion being a pertinent candidate.

The fashion industry, both in Africa and overseas, is exceedingly Eurocentric. With Africa becoming a more prominent player in the global fashion economy, decolonisation has become a central focus to fashion practitioners everywhere. There is an evident need to focus on how marginalised fashion practitioners can aid in transforming the educational curriculum for the better.

This white paper aims to understand the meaning of decolonisation from an African perspective and provide suggestions for how international institutions can decolonise their fashion education curricula.

What is Decolonisation?

Decolonisation in fashion has been referred to as the ‘revaluation’ of African fashion design practises, narratives, and management procedures that were neglected or erased by the history of colonialism (Jansen, 2019). The move to decolonise the fashion curriculum is in order to transform fashion narratives by putting African fashion practises on the same ground as Eurocentric standards; as well as eliminating the purely traditional connotations attached to African fashion. Rather than presenting African fashion as an alternative, it must be included within the core fashion discussion. This is on account of the history of colonialism present in European-led fashion discussions, as well as the lasting effect colonialism has had on the development of African fashion sensibilities.

The conversation around decolonisation has largely been focused on addressing structural inequalities within university environments such as racism, representation, and sensitivity training among university faculty (Taylor & Riaz, 2021). However, this needs to be extended to tangible course material, as learning material and knowledge sharing are just as important. Decolonising the fashion education curriculum is concerned with the experience of education in its totality: by reshaping the understanding of fashion practises to include previously neglected areas (Thind, 2020). This covers the entire curriculum: from fashion business and management to fashion theory and design practises.

The aim for decolonisation is to add marginalised voices into the foundation of fashion knowledge, rather than presenting this knowledge as an alternative or other. Through our research, we have considered the following suggestions for decolonising fashion education in Northern America and Europe to aid efforts to the lasting implementation of a decolonised curriculum.

01. Teaching Materials



Image Credit: Pexels

The ability to create and share knowledge is tantamount to decolonising the curriculum, as there is a need to have a stable foundation of resources that can be used. Including African authors, scholars, and researchers in the current fashion education curriculum can assist in the diversification of teaching materials that are available to students. This can be in the form of fundamental texts, books, journal articles, and case studies. Exposure to different teaching materials can assist in elevating fashion knowledge that is considered traditional or strictly cultural; as well as expand the global fashion narrative.

Africa is full of resources, as found through CIAFE's research regarding 'The State of Fashion Education in Africa in 2021': which indicated that there are several fashion institutions on the continent that are aiming to produce fashion education resources that are useful for African students. The development of these resources can also be adopted by the international fashion community as a way to diversify teaching materials.

02. Teaching Practises

In conjunction with using a wider variety of resources used in fashion education, a range of teaching practises can also be employed to further diversify the fashion education curriculum. As different forms of knowledge exist, so do different forms of receiving that knowledge. Presenting a variety of teaching methods allows students to be able to gain new skills, as well as be able to gain and share knowledge in different ways (Mgqwashu, 2016).



Introducing students to fashion design practice, pattern making, textile usage, and business management techniques that have been used by marginalised fashion practitioners can be useful in being able to integrate African fashion professionals within the global fashion industry; as well as integrate marginalised fashion practises within the global fashion industry.

03. Alternative Sources of Knowledge

One of the pillars of decolonisation is the ability to consider alternative forms of knowledge and knowledge production (Adebisi, 2020). This consists of challenging and critiquing the inherent power dynamics present within educational structures; and opening the boundaries of institutional knowledge to other forms of knowledge production. Within the fashion education curriculum, this can consider different teaching and assessment methods, alternative skill-sharing, and informal knowledge as part of the creation of knowledge. This can take the form of engaging with cross-collaborative teaching tools, using knowledge banks for teaching resources, and consulting resources that are outside of institutional borders for formal knowledge, such as local artisans.



Image Credit: Pexels

This is to be able to acknowledge the plurality of education and begin to de-centre Western standards of teaching and learning. This can also be implemented through altering language used in teaching materials, varying assessment tasks, and modes of instruction by drawing from African-based methodologies rooted in holistic and communal learning (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002). These pillars of traditional African education focus on community knowledge and culture sharing, rather than individual assessment-based learning.

04. Open Dialogue with Students

Just as the materials being taught to students should be considered carefully to provide a comprehensive set of resources, students should be able to voice their concerns with teaching materials and methods. The presence of open dialogue is important to efforts of decolonising education on account of the need for students to be included within the teaching process (Keele University, 2018). The ability for students to give feedback on newly employed teaching materials, reflect on coursework, and be invited to share with faculty members is a useful tool in gauging the effectiveness of decolonising efforts. This is also in line with the growing number of international students on university campuses.



As a result, there needs to be an open dialogue between students and faculty to be able to ensure the teaching materials, teaching methods, and production of knowledge is done in a careful, holistic manner. For example, the University of the Arts London launched a zine curated by both staff and students in 2018 documenting experiences of decolonising the arts curriculum in the UK (Tague, 2021). The zine is produced in conjunction with annual events showcasing the progress of decolonisation as well as highlighting potential challenges in trying to redress past imbalances.

05. Faculty



Image Credit: Pexels

Another great starting point for transforming the fashion curriculum is for universities and other educational institutions to reconsider their present faculty. The employment of African fashion scholars and researchers in permanent positions can be considered in tandem with the inclusion of more comprehensive teaching materials. Training courses can be employed, to prepare staff with the skills needed to be able to fully interact with changing course materials and potential changing teaching methods.

Training courses and upskilling initiatives can be valuable methods used to prepare staff members for changes being made in education practices across the board. This benefits African fashion academics and researchers by granting them a wider audience to teach and present their work to; as well as ensures the readiness of all faculty members in their commitment to decoloniality.

06. Guest Lectures and Short Courses



Image Credit: Pexels

Fashion education institutions can also consider the use of guest lectures and short courses offered by African fashion scholars as a means to facilitate knowledge sharing. This can act as a direct form of investment into the development and integration of African fashion knowledge into the international fashion education curriculum.

The use of guest lectures is useful as it provides scholars and researchers with exposure to new audiences, and provides the opportunity to collaborate with accredited institutions. The same can be said for short courses, which offer a longer-term opportunity for skills and knowledge sharing through direct collaboration with universities.

07. Work Experience

Work experience is a valuable part of any university program, with the opportunity to gain professional opportunities and professional exposure as a key part of the fashion industry. In the effort to decolonise the curriculum, educational bodies can include fashion brands, designers, and practitioners from emerging economies and people in the diaspora within their work experience initiatives. This can be a functional way to introduce students to an array of different brand names; as well as potentially introduce students to a wider variety of fashion design and management practises.



Image Credit: Pexels

The extension of work experience to include African businesses serves to expand the narrative of fashion and fashion education, by giving African fashion knowledge a greater platform for dispersal. Accessibility is a key feature of the decolonial framework, and work experience is a go-to avenue to explore the plurality of fashion knowledge production. The extension of work experience to include African fashion practitioners can also assist in the creation of global networks and partnerships through mutually beneficial knowledge exchange.

08. Accessibility

In an effort to de-centre Western voices from the fashion education curriculum, giving African scholars, researchers, and practitioners the opportunity to make and publish work to contribute to the global fashion economy would be a notable effort in the mission to decolonise the fashion education curriculum.



The opportunity for African scholars and researchers to gain exposure through assistance from international fashion education and publishing bodies can help in the effort to redress previous inequalities. This is by widening the audience of African fashion research through the greater inclusion of work done by African scholars in official and far-reaching publications. This can help generate interest in African fashion research as well as provide a space for supporting African research efforts.

09. Supporting African Programs and Projects



Image Credit: Pexels

As mentioned above, there is ample knowledge being produced on the continent in line with contemporary fashion education. Numerous workshops, training programs, and educational programs are being conducted by a myriad of organisations in Africa. These programs are usually conducted with the aim to prepare African fashion practitioners for the demands of the international industry. The extension of these projects beyond continental borders can assist in both the support of the growth of the African fashion

industry; as well as facilitate partnerships directly with other international education bodies. Constant engagement with African-led fashion initiatives can be another means to level the playing field when it comes to educational resources. Western educational institutions can benefit from engaging with African fashion research bodies to include African voices in the global fashion discourse.

10. Collaborations

A successful partnership is always mutually beneficial. In line with the theme of redressing negligent practises of the past, members of the African fashion industry can be considered when looking for reciprocal collaborative opportunities. The incorporation of independent knowledge being produced within the African fashion industry could be another useful avenue employed by international fashion bodies in an effort to decolonise their fashion curricula.



The inclusion of contemporary African fashion research, in conjunction with the limited sources available documenting African fashion history, could assist in providing a holistic narrative of African fashion. African fashion research in recent years has been committed to aiming to preserve African fashion relics in line with European conventions (Ahmed, 2021). This research could benefit a wider audience, as it is imperative to provide a fuller picture of African fashion practice; as well as acting as a useful, lasting resource for international fashion bodies.

Conclusion

The effort to decolonise the fashion education curriculum needs to be embraced by global members of the fashion community. This is to create a fashion narrative that is inclusive, comprehensive, and holistic; to redress the negligence of fashion narratives that did not fit into the colonial model. Decolonising fashion education is concerned with the ability to de-centre European voices within fashion education, to present marginalised fashion knowledge as just as valuable and useful as their Western counterparts.

The application of the suggestions we have suggested in this report could be useful for Western education bodies to assist in the lasting changes that need to be made to the fashion education curriculum. This is in order to view African and other marginalised fashion knowledge as on par with that which is being produced and consulted internationally.

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