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How to break into fashion: 'A good school won't give you an easy pass'

Even the top fashion schools can't teach originality. You need to connect with industry pros in person, and start local to get ahead



▲ Models walk the runway during London Fashion Week in January 2018. Photograph: Jeff Spicer/BFC/Getty Images for BFC

Ts [the fashion industry] glamorous? Not really," says set designer Mariesha Green, who studied at the Chelsea School of Arts and has worked for brands such as Agent Provocateur and Marni. "Is it worth it if you make it? Yeah. But very few do. It's highly creative, but it's very competitive."

Indeed, the fashion industry can be elitist and hard to crack. It can be all about who you know and, especially in the past, doing **countless unpaid internships**.

Although **British fashion schools dominate international league tables** (Central Saint Martins tops the Business of Fashion's Global Fashion School Rankings for the third year in a row; four others feature in the top 10; and a further 11 UK schools make the top 50), there are **almost 20,000 students** accepted for UK undergraduate design studies courses each year. This means even students from leading fashion universities face stiff competition when trying to break into the industry. So how can students get ahead?

Bring ideas

"The fashion industry is run on ideas," says Sarah Raphael, editor-at-large of Refinery UK. "Unless it's a specific trade job like pattern-cutting or design, no one even asks where or what you studied."

Even the top colleges can't teach originality. Caryn Franklin, fashion commentator and professor at Kingston School of Art, says students should look beyond set texts and social media to find new ideas. "Read widely, look at historical costume and people that inspire you in the art world," she says. "Go to free exhibitions, go to markets, talk to people making products and have a creative experience not just online or through film."

Joanne Matthews, creative curriculum director at Fashion Awareness Direct, a charity that runs workshops and competitions aimed at giving young people the chance to get ahead in the industry, recommends creating a professional Instagram account, engaging with brands and putting it on your CV. "Use your imagination and collaborate with other creatives," she says. "Create photoshoots, shows and products to sell. Using social media is a clever tool and making it beautiful is a good way to show your ideas."

Do a placement year

An industry placement year can be a path to success in fashion. It's where students can make contacts and gain work experience, and where employers can identify the skills they're looking for in students.

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Placement years are organised through universities and a lot of big companies do their internships this way. High street brands can be a good way to gain experience. "Be realistic," advises Matthews. "And don't be snobby. Most jobs are in big commercial companies. There are only a handful at top designers, so people should be open as to where they do their placements. Big companies can also offer structure and experiences that smaller companies can't."

Nottingham Trent graduate Rebecca Dailey regrets not having done one. "I graduated in 2009 - a really tricky time. Lots of us ended up ditching our fashion dream so we could quit unpaid internships and actually earn some money," she says. "A year's placement could have been more valuable than anything."

Stay in touch with your classmates

Your university cohort is essential to helping you find a job in fashion. Build these relationships because they will be your contacts and colleagues in the future. "You can have a massive network in the industry by the time you leave. You'll already be ahead," says Green.

"I've got most of my jobs through RCA friends. Contacts are one of the best things I got from there," adds jeweller and Royal College of Art graduate Marina Stanimirovic, who thinks that surrounding yourself with creative people pushes you and your talent further.

Think local

With 80% of students applying to "handful" of employers, students should look to create their own local networks rather than aiming for their dream job immediately. "Hold events with people around you, blog and photograph your creativity, make clothes for friends and talk to people on the shop floor of your favourite place to find out what's selling and why," advises Franklin.

Meet the pros in person

Designers, editors, stylists and creative directors often give talks at universities. It's worth turning up and making yourself known. "Meeting people face to face is always better, or use the phone make a personal connection and then follow up with an email afterwards," says Franklin. "It's very easy to ignore online connections."

Raphael also recommends asking your tutors for help. "My tutor helped sort out a few internships for people directly if he felt they were particularly suited," she says.

Look for alternative routes

Apprenticeships are another way to break into the industry. They tend to be hands-on, in skills such as garment technology and pattern cutting - areas where there are more jobs than straight-up design.

However, whether you go to the top fashion college or have no formal fashion education at all, Lynette Nylander, deputy editor of Teen Vogue, says there should be room for everyone. "I would love to see more people using unorthodox paths into the industry, because it is clear that fresh blood is needed. Some of the most interesting people I've ever met in the industry have not gone to fashion school."

Franklin agrees, adding: "You don't have to come from a high-profile institution to believe in yourself and your ability to do well."