The decentralisation of fashion education in Northeast England through collaborative practice between education, communities and industry

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Abstract

This article focuses on a collaboration between educators at higher education institutions in the UK, reflecting on fashion education in Northeast England and how it is evolving to support and diversify aspirations for the arts outside London. The project is supported by research backed by the British Fashion Council, aiming to explore regional initiatives to enable young creatives to have stable careers in fashion and the arts across the UK. This paper demonstrates how examples of this have been implemented through the work of the community education group This is Creative Enterprise, UAL, Teesside and Northumbria universities, through building pathways from schools to universities and encouraging dialogue between schools, industry, higher education and community groups. Case studies demonstrate participatory research projects that encourage responsible engagement with fashion, supporting regional growth, community engagement and a decentralised vision.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Fashion, Higher education, Community, Participatory, Localism, Reuse and repair

Introduction

Fashion education in the UK today is facing multiple challenges. On the one hand, a volatile academic landscape, impacted by funding constraints including restrictions to international student visas (Adams, 2024) – on the other, an impending "arts apocalypse" in schools, defined by a coalition of arts and education organisations as a "deep, multi-faceted and worsening" crisis (Martin, 2024), has resulted in a steep drop in pupils taking arts subjects at GCSE and A levels, with fewer students choosing creative subjects at university. The fashion sector itself is renowned for its significant contribution to climate change through unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. It is responsible for between 2% and 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, significantly contributing to pollution and impacting water and biodiversity, as well as social injustices on a global scale (Arthur, 2023). Fashion education appears to be in crisis – as trend forecaster Li Edelkoort predicted nine years ago in her Anti-Fashion Manifesto, deeming it "out of society, and de facto … old-fashioned … Out of step with a world hungry for consensus and altruism" (Edelkoort, 2015, p. 1).

Despite this, we find room for optimism. The United Nations Environment Programme's *Sustainable Fashion Communication Playbook* advocates the contribution fashion can make to communities through presenting the challenges faced by the sector as creative opportunities (Arthur, 2023). As educators at higher education institutions (HEIs) located in London and the Northeast of England, we are passionate about the value of creative education and the benefits this can bring to local communities. We have set out

to develop a version of fashion education that reflects and supports regional opportunities and the communities that we engage with to create a responsible and relevant new vision for fashion.

Decentralisation is defined as **"**the dispersion or distribution of functions and powers", and in Sociology as "the redistribution of population and industry from urban centers to outlying areas" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Traditionally, the locus of the fashion industry in the UK has been London, with bodies such as the British Fashion Council, as well as incubators such as Fashion East and the internationally renowned London Fashion Week based in the city. However, McRobbie et al. (2023) discuss how London as a global fashion centre has become unsustainable, with rents for home and workspaces out of reach for many and the cost of attending its art and design "super-brand" universities attainable only for those with independent wealth. McRobbie et al. (2023) call for the decentralisation of fashion culture away from London and the Southeast to balance social inequality and vibrant fashion cultures to grow outside the metropolis.

According to regional specificity, decentralisation can support a more responsible fashion system that begins with pre-16 education and brings together schools, higher education (HE), community groups, small or medium-sized enterprises and industry partners to support growth in local creative industries. Amongst the challenges, we see opportunities: students who reject the established fashion system, a growing number of graduates who want to remain in the region, a vibrant enterprise sector, collaborative opportunities with enthusiastic industry and third-sector partners, alternative routes into learning and broader community engagement. We also believe that collaboration between HEIs regionally and nationally is vital for creating a responsible and sustainable future for fashion.

This paper outlines methods we have used to evolve a version of fashion education that creatively addresses decentralisation through providing relevant contemporary educational projects. Case studies outline how we have done this through three approaches: increasing accessibility to fashion education through collaboration with schools and community groups; exploiting the considerable potential for future digital fashion in the region, providing opportunities for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and encouraging localised and supportive fashion through repair hubs, rebuilding our creative communities through a reuse, recycle and re-loved approach.

Literature review

London is well established as the location for the UK fashion industry, as one of the "Big Four" capitals – including New York, Milan, and Paris – due to its long-standing oligarchic power in defining fashion (Godart, 2014). The idea of "fashion cities" and "fashion capitals" defines the images and influences the economies of those cities (Berry, 2012; Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Godart, 2014). Fashion weeks and their ability to attract key industry players emphasise their locations as sites for the switching, transmission, and commercialisation of fashion and design knowledge (Brydges & Hracs, 2019).

London and the Southeast constitute 57% of all fashion economic activity in the UK (Harris et al., 2021). However, McRobbie et al. (2023) argue that London is no longer a viable option for those young creatives from working-class backgrounds who would until recently been able to make a significant contribution to the city's arts and culture. As the "super-brand" universities, such as Central St Martins, have built state-of-the-art campuses, the cost of living and working close to them has become further out of reach for low-

income students. As a result, the fashion industry in the UK, heavily drawn from institutions, retains an increasing inequality and a lack of representation from diverse social groups.

McRobbie et al. (2023) outline key recommendations that would need to be addressed if we are to resolve some of the inequality in the creative industries: free HE; access routes from school via youth centres and community groups; and trained and available professionals who can implement access initiatives. They recommend challenging assumptions underpinning the agendas of organisations such as the British Fashion Council and holding debates around curricula in regional universities' fashion departments to question 'the prevailing cultural values that inform professional codes and working practices in fashion" (McRobbie et al., p. 26).

The North, and the Northeast in particular, are, as Niven (2023) says, "defined by ... an enduring marginality from an imperial civilisation overwhelmingly centred on London" (p. 282). He suggests that there is no point in waiting for a great reversal of power – that the only way to respond to a national culture where politics, journalism, literary publishing, business, finance, education and the arts, are all biased toward London and the Southeast, is to focus on small, achievable ways of resisting the status quo and its arguably fixed regional inequalities (Niven, 2023).

Our aim is not to challenge the existence of the London-based fashion industry, but to encourage a localised and supportive version of it. We see a future in rebuilding our creative communities with a focus on degrowth. As Hickel (2021) describes it, degrowth stands for a rebalancing of income and resources, a reduction of inequality, decolonisation, of both lands and peoples – about reciprocity and care, centred around human flourishing and ecological stability, rather than the constant accumulation of capital. A decentralised form of fashion can focus on the positive impact of fashion, and the effect it can have on our communities.

Niessen (2022) expands on degrowth with "de-fashion", a term coined by the activist group Fashion Act Now, calling for a paradigm shift in the fashion industry that puts people, their lives and the earth first. Mazzarella and Black (2023) outline ways fashion activism can inspire positive socioeconomic change and co-design meaningful social innovations in local communities. They demonstrate how a "quiet" form of activism can be used to co-design meaningful social innovations within the local community and demonstrate how fashion can contribute to better living. The rise of repair cafés (Jobe, 2024) demonstrates how opportunities exist to engage communities in responsible fashion practice and create meaningful engagement amongst their participants. Moalem and Mosgaard (2021) discuss how repair cafés function as 'change agents' that can influence mindsets and acts spanning urban planning to pedagogical aspects.

The role of the university in bringing about positive social interactions has been explored by Fassi et al. (2019) through the role of university campuses, social innovation through storytelling and models for sustainability. Social equity is a critical element of university strategies at Teeside (Teeside University, 2024) and Northumbria (Northumbria University, 2024) universities. The latter is investing in the Centre for Health and Social Equity (CHASE) after being awarded £5.8 million by the Office for Students. CHASE aims to develop and harness the university's research, education and knowledge exchange expertise to help meet the health and social needs of multiple stakeholders and communities in the city, region and beyond.

We hope that decentralisation can bring about a more responsible engagement with fashion through accessible, inventive and approachable modes of engagement. Wilska (2017) suggests that to make the "transition into more sustainable lifestyles, [we need a] better understanding of young people's potential for change [through] more innovative research methods, such as participatory practices and analyses of youth-led innovations and initiatives" (p. 316). Von Busch and Bjereld (2016) suggest that fashion is "used to sort and compartmentalise the social world, … create[ing] genuine social and personal consequences" (p. 90). Our approach to encouraging a more responsible approach to fashion will "reflect and reinforce inclusion", negating the typically held views of "superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality and desirability/undesirability" (Von Busch & Bjereld, 2016, p. 93).

Methodology

The research projects discussed in this article used a variety of methods and processes. The first phase of the project was undertaken by one of the authors, working on behalf of the British Fashion Council (BFC) whilst on secondment from University of the Arts (UAL), and supported by students from the institution as a filmmaker and report writer. Questionnaires, desk research, roundtable discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 establishments to identify the challenges and barriers to engaging with a more pluralistic fashion education in Newcastle and the Northeast region of England. The participants were invited to discuss how best to bring about opportunities, support change within the region and share best practices about current initiatives. The team visited and consulted with schools, universities, and business organisations, including Newcastle College, Northumbria University, Teesside University, the Northeast Local Enterprise Partnership and This Is Creative Enterprise. They talked to locally based brands: Barbour, Fenwick, END, Slacks Radio, UKFT and Launchpad. A report was delivered to the BFC and the author's home institution to share insights and next steps, and it was also shared with the study participants.

The activities described in the case studies took place after the initial scoping study and were all part of ongoing teaching and learning/outreach/participatory design projects. Qualitative data was gathered from the participants in all the case studies, in accordance with ethical review procedures at each institution. The data collection methods depended on each project's size and scale. Due to this article's scope and the nature of the projects, quantitative data is not used here, but qualitative comments from participants are used to support the case studies.

The approaches used in the case studies included design activism – defined by Fuad-Luke (2009) as "design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and economic change" (p. 27). Further details of the methods used are outlined in the respective case studies.

Northeast Project: Diversifying the creative industry

Our collaboration began with a scoping exercise supported by the British Fashion Council (BFC), initiated by their Lead on Educational and Resource Development for Diversity and Inclusion. The Northeast Project was a research initiative looking at the Northeast and its surrounding areas to diversify fashion education and aspirations for the arts outside London. The BFC is a not-for-profit organisation that supports the interests of the British fashion industry through the collective sharing of knowledge, resources and experiences (British Fashion Council, n.d.). It has also set up the Institute of Positive Fashion, with a 10-year strategy to enable the industry to reduce climate and societal impact in line with UN goals.

Working with schools, academics, and organisations around the Northeast of England, the project aimed to explore regional initiatives and support the creation of more –to enable young creatives to have stable careers in fashion and the arts across the UK. The project focused on how the fashion industry can be diversified beyond London and into surrounding areas in the UK, beginning with the Northeast of England. This area was chosen as it has experienced heightened deprivation. The Northeast has a rich manufacturing heritage and is known for technical textile production. However, this represents only 2% of fashion clusters in the UK, compared to 44% in London (UKFT; Ellams et al., 2023). GDP per person in the North East in 2022 was 18% below England (excluding London), and this gap has increased since the recession in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic (North East Evidence Hub, 2024). The project aimed to establish how to reach marginalised communities to broaden and develop current and new creative projects, primarily centred around fashion, to facilitate local industry growth.

The report concluded with key recommendations, including building pipelines between education, industry and grassroots organisations; multi-level educational collaboration, mentoring and professional development; and apprenticeships and placements, funding and developing a creative network.

It was established that many of these initiatives were already in place through HEIs partnering with schools, community groups and industry. As academics based at three HEIs – UAL, Northumbria and Teesside, we were keen to build on the BFC's recommendations and share our knowledge and experience of the region, to establish how this might be transferable to other regions and sectors. The three case studies that follow embody approaches taken at Northumbria and Teesside Universities to share learning and experience through education that supports regional growth, community engagement and a decentralised vision.

Case Study 1: Northumbria and This is Creative Enterprise: Building pathways between schools and universities

Since 2016, the fashion department at Northumbria University and the educational non-profit organisation This is Creative Enterprise (TICE) have partnered to address the obstacles and uncertainties young people face when considering pursuing fashion as an educational pathway. Our aim is to support young people with fair access and equal opportunities in the fashion industry and, more broadly, the creative sector.

Northumbria University is in Newcastle upon Tyne in the Northeast of England. Around 40% of Northumbria students are from traditionally low-participation backgrounds, with many being first in their family to attend university, 55% are from the local area, and 63% stay in the region for employment after graduation (Northumbria University, 2023, p. 55). Driving social mobility is one of three pillars of the *University Strategy 2030* (Northumbria University, 2024), with significant investment placed in creating the Centre for Health and Social Equity (CHASE) on campus to support research and teaching in this area.

The fashion department at Northumbria was established in 1955 and is internationally recognised for innovative and hands-on 'industry-ready' graduates. Our practice-based students work with industrially qualified technicians and pattern cutters, many of whom trained at the Dewhirst factory in Stockton-upon-Tees, suppliers to Marks and Spencer. This rich history and skills base is one of our USPs – employers seek our graduates because they understand technical processes and have a highly skilled ability to make decisions. Our fashion department's commitment and contribution to the local community was evidenced

through the pandemic when technical support staff and academics came together to manufacture thousands of clinical gowns for NHS workers treating Covid-19 patients.

Through our roles at Northumbria, we see ourselves as having a significant role in supporting social equity within fashion education, especially given our region's context. We believe we are responsible to our students and the wider community to deliver an education of value to the individual, the region and the industry. The industry must be diversified, not only in terms of race and gender but also social diversity – with a pipeline from grassroots and community groups and schools through HE and into the industry that supports and nurtures creativity amongst marginalised students, not just the privileged.

This is Creative Enterprise programmes and Northumbria
This is Creative Enterprise (TICE) is a national award-winning grassroots organisation that builds a pipeline from secondary education through industry interaction and HE. TICE programmes are designed to support young people in their understanding of the job roles, careers and skills needed for the future of the creative, design and digital sectors. The focus is on developing projects that cater to the needs of young people seeking fashion opportunities in the Northeast – for example exploring how artificial intelligence can elevate the work of designers, artists and other creatives.

TICE projects help students see fashion differently, demonstrating opportunities outside traditional fashion systems and frameworks that might exclude them. Projects are aligned with local businesses and fashion mentors, embedding industry context and demonstrating career opportunities in the region.

Participants are also given insight into the broader job opportunities within fashion and the creative industries and how this can be supported through further and higher education, showing students and their parents the value of pursuing a career in the creative industries. Masterclasses are provided by fashion academic and technical support staff to develop project work and bring participants into the university.

Image 1: TICE/Northumbria masterclass February 2024. Photo credit: G. Cantrell.

Teachers' continuing professional development day

Feedback from and unstructured interviews with the teachers attending the university masterclasses led to the observation that teachers themselves would welcome industry knowledge and development. Therefore, a teacher continuing professional development day was established to share insights from local industry professionals, who spoke about emerging trends in their sectors and the skills gaps that they believed would need to be addressed in future employees. The teachers could view example applicant portfolios and speak with staff about what they would look for in applicants. Graduate outcomes were also explored to help the teachers advise students and parents of the opportunities available within the creative and design sectors.

Work in progress day

Finally, a work in progress day has been established. Teachers from schools across the Northeast are invited to bring teams of children from Year 9/Key Stage 3 to learn more about the fashion department through the 'Fashion at Northumbria: Work in Progress' exhibition. This is an opportunity to gain an insight into final year undergraduate projects at a formative stage, inviting discourse and participation in the working process, methods of thinking and making. Current students lead the groups and encourage interaction with staff and students. These days have proven to be transformative for some students, many of whom had not entered a university or considered taking up creative subjects beyond GCSE. One teacher commented, "Most of these students have not even been out of Ashington into Newcastle city centre, let alone into a university!" Through interaction with current students, the visitors were able to experience genuine social and personal engagement with fashion as a subject, with some children with special learning needs, such as autism, for the first time considering their future opportunities for creative education.

Case Study 2: Fashion forward: The rise of digital careers in the Tees Valley

Technology has profoundly impacted the fashion landscape, revolutionising how clothes are designed, manufactured, marketed and consumed. COVID-19 hastened fashion's digitalisation and engagement with virtual environments, allowing the fashion industry to reimagine business strategies, emphasising sustainability and digital innovation (Choi, 2022). This study reports on the emerging opportunities in the Tees Valley for digital careers and a project at Teesside University aiming to engage with young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who could face barriers to entry into HE and the fashion sector. The project was developed with the British Fashion Council's Barriers to Entry programme, an industry-sponsored programme with a long-term plan to create a more diverse and equitable fashion industry.

Exploring fashion's tech revolution and emerging careers

Fashion brands recognise the potential of virtual worlds and computer games as creative and immersive platforms for brand engagement and marketing. Some notable examples include Louis Vuitton's collaboration with Riot Games on the *League of Legends* game, which included a virtual and physical collection. Balenciaga and Nike partnered with Epic Games to release limited edition garments and footwear, enabling players to express their style within the game (Epic Games, n.d.; Nike.com, 2023).

The intersection of fashion and digital technology has created new career avenues, driven by the rise of the metaverse and virtual worlds and the integration of clothing within computer games. The Fabricant, The Dematerialised and DressX are digital fashion houses leading the way in creating digital clothing, giving opportunities for virtual fashion designers to create digital clothing and accessories tailored for avatars in virtual worlds (Marriott, 2020). Digital fashion design allows professionals more flexibility in their

workplace, enabling them to pursue freelance careers and license their creations online. The British Fashion Council in 2021 gave the first-ever Fashion Award for Metaverse Design. The new award acknowledges a digital designer who shows excellence in digital fashion design within the metaverse (Businesswire, 2021), recognising digital designers as professionals in the fashion industry.

These emerging careers underscore the transformative impact of digital technology on the fashion industry, offering diverse opportunities for creative expression and innovation within virtual spaces. Using computer-generated imagery (CGI) digital models for fashion shoots and catwalk presentations is on the rise as an effective means to showcase fashion collections. The rise of digital avatars in the fashion sector and on social media opens the potential for future opportunities for roles such as virtual fashion stylists, who curate digital wardrobes and advise clients on avatar appearance.

Epic Games has partnered with The Fashion Innovation Agency, The Fabricant and Burberry to create a free course exploring the impact of interactive 3D on the fashion sector and careers in fashion and games. This initiative aims to educate students to master interactive 3D tools and use them to address career-oriented challenges, providing practical insight into the fashion industry through hands-on, real-world digital fashion projects (Epic Developer Community, n.d.). As technology for immersive gaming experiences advances, visualising detailed garment styling, construction and fabric movement becomes more crucial, creating opportunities for fashion designers to engage with the gaming industry.

The Tees Valley: a world-leading digital and creative hub
Tees Valley is fast becoming one of the most vibrant digital hubs in the UK, developing a worldwide reputation for creativity, imagination and vision. The Tees Valley hosts businesses in multiple tech sectors, including VR technology, big data, digital marketing, game design, programming and artificial intelligence. The Tees Valley region has actively engaged with creative digital businesses, particularly in the computer games sector, leveraging the expertise and resources of Teesside University to foster growth and innovation through the DigitalCity initiative (DigitalCity, n.d.).

One notable aspect of this engagement is the establishment of collaborative initiatives between Teesside University and local game development companies. Teesside University offers specialised courses in game design and development and related fields, providing a skilled workforce for the digital sector. It has played a pivotal role in supporting start-ups and small businesses in the digital sector through initiatives that include business incubators, accelerators and funding opportunities tailored to the needs of creative digital enterprises. By providing access to mentorship, networking events and resources, the university has helped nurture a vibrant ecosystem of digital innovation in the Tees Valley (Walker, 2021).

The Tees Valley Combined Authority has actively promoted the region as a hub for creative digital industries, leveraging its assets such as affordable office space, supportive infrastructure and access to talent from Teesside University. In 2024, the region will attract £160 million from government funding to invest in its infrastructure, skills and workforce, business support, planning research and innovation (Tees Valley Combined Authority, 2024).

Teesside University hosts Animex, the world's longest-running games and animation festival (Animex, n.d). All the most prominent studios in the world – Disney, Weta, Bethesda, Blizzard and Aardman – have taken part in this festival. Speakers are also invited to give advice to students and review portfolios. For future

events, this platform will help cultivate a network for the BA Fashion programme, fostering opportunities within digital fashion.

Image 2: CLO3D workshop at Teesside University. Photo credit: L. Hugill.

Digital Fashion – opening new markets and opportunities: Teesside University Access and Participation Plan Innovation Fund project

Teesside University has a long-established commitment to supporting individuals from underrepresented groups. Currently, the student population has over 80% of students who would meet at least one of the criteria set out by the Office for Students as underrepresented or with a specified characteristic, and 73% are recruited from the Northeast. Teesside University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) identifies where there are gaps in performance relating to students from particular backgrounds or with particular characteristics and sets out targets and measures to address the identified gaps. The APP innovation fund allocates funds to projects that engage students from underrepresented groups.

This APP project aimed to provide a series of one- and two-day workshops to engage young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who face barriers to entry into the fashion sector, providing exposure and access to fashion skills and raising awareness of the new market opportunities and careers in the digital sector. Additionally, they demonstrate potential pathways for studying fashion at the HE level and raise awareness of the Tees Valley, rapidly emerging as a vibrant digital hub for businesses.

Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) is a classification system used in the United Kingdom to measure HE participation rates across geographical areas (Office for Students, 2018). Students from Northeast institutions in POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 likely come from communities where fewer young people traditionally pursue HE and may be underrepresented in HEIs. These students may be disadvantaged through limited educational infrastructure, financial constraints and lack of awareness about available opportunities. However, despite lower participation rates, students from the Northeast in POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 come from diverse backgrounds, with the potential to bring unique perspectives, experiences and talents to HEIs and the creative economy.

This project focused on art and design students from Macmillan Academy in years 9 and 12 and diploma students from Middlesbrough College. This influenced some participants to consider creative studies as

they made their GCSE subject choices. Both institutions fall into POLAR4 Q1, indicating that students are less likely to pursue a university education. Students from Teesside University's BA Fashion and BA Computer Games courses were paid as researchers to develop and deliver learning materials for workshops mentored by tutors from their courses. The learning centred around the new fashion landscape and opportunities within digital careers, including practical tasks, where participants created digital 3D fashion concepts using CLO3D on avatars (Image 2) and 3D environments using the UNREAL Engine. In addition, students used the University's motion capture lab, which employed industry-standard technology to translate movement into data for animation.

Project impact and outcomes

Participant surveys evaluated the project and feedback from the institutions. Twenty-five students engaged in the learning process at the two institutions. The students gave positive feedback, with 50% rating their overall experience as excellent, 100% of students indicating that the workshops made them more interested in university study and a career in the creative industries, and 90% of students stating that they would recommend Teesside University to a friend. Only 30% had attended extracurricular activities in art and design, and 88% of the students had turned down opportunities to attend activities in the past due to difficulty in arranging travel or caring responsibilities. The Teesside University students from the BA Computer Games and BA Fashion courses who worked collaboratively on the project gained experience developing and delivering learning and developed a deeper understanding of the fashion and games industry and career opportunities. They also enhanced their research and transferable skills, including communication, presentation, collaboration and organisational abilities. The fashion and computer games tutors worked together on the project and planned further collaboration, including training for fashion and games students on garment construction and fabric drapes. Work was collated and presented to Macmillan Academy on a large canvas (Image 3) to display in the school. The students presented their work to the school in assembly and disseminated their experiences to their peers.

Image 3: Work by year 9 and year 12 students at Macmillan Academy.

The rise of technology and opportunities to develop new markets in virtual environments for the fashion industry presents Teesside University with an opportunity to equip students for emerging careers in digital fashion, promotion and virtual styling. Through the region's games companies in the thriving Tees Valley digital creative hub, the university's fashion programme is poised to establish a robust network. Leveraging

the university's expertise in computer games, students can develop skills vital for the digital fashion landscape.

Case study 3: Chopwell Regeneration Group Repair Hub Project: Northumbria University
This project explored the potential of community-based participatory research to identify, develop and promote innovative approaches to responsible fashion practice. It reflected on the value of experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate students in seeing their learning put into practice in a local community setting and seeing tangible benefits from their input.

The village of Chopwell in the district of Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, has under 10,000 residents. A former mining community, known as "Little Moscow" due to its strong support for the Communist Party (Chopwell Regeneration Group, 2024) it has suffered from poor transport links and unemployment since the loss of this industry. The Chopwell Regeneration Group CIO (CRG) was formed as a grassroots community-led drive to change the lives and life chances of people in the community. Priority activity includes bringing empty properties back into use to serve the community, with a vision to improve health, well-being and prosperity by creating services, facilities and opportunities that meet their needs and improve their lives.

The CRG created a local food shop and café, which is used for community events. The food within this shop is waste collected from local supermarkets and cooked by local residents, with a pay as you feel initiative, alongside a 'pay it forward' option. This space has become a focal point for the community, and due to its success, the CRG managed to secure another local shop in the town.

Through a community consultation and vote, it was decided that the next step for the charity would be to open a clothing and electrical repair and remanufacturing space, which they named The Regeneration Shop. The aim was to support the local community with volunteering, job creation and skills development opportunities. This new venture will bring an empty retail unit back into use and encourage residents in the village and the local area to bring household items (from small electrical goods to clothing) to be repaired by local volunteers. Residents will also be able to get involved in a series of free events to learn how to repair items and develop their skills. The shop will sell repaired and upcycled second-hand goods, contributing to a more sustainable future.

The group contacted the fashion department at Northumbria University to establish whether we could support the initiative and provide advice and skills sharing to the community. The initial steps in this project were practical. The shop needed machinery, and the fashion department was able to donate some unused sewing machines to facilitate upskilling residents once the initiative was launched.

The Regeneration Shop launch event
It was established that the community would be most interested in learning how to repair and rework preloved clothing and how to use creative styling techniques to learn how to integrate more second-hand items into their wardrobes. A launch event was planned where these skills would be demonstrated along with promoting the initiative to the community and through press activity.

Donations were collected from around the university, with over 120 items donated. Garments ranged from unworn (tagged) Primark clothing to Marni and Nigel Cabourn labels. Around 10% of garments were

damaged in some way and were set aside to be repaired. Another nonprofit community partner, the Caring Hands Community Laundrette, was engaged to wash and dry donated items.

A call for volunteers was put out to fashion students, and 25 signed up from the undergraduate and postgraduate fashion programmes. The students were given free rein over styling and invited to select garments from the rails of donated clothing to create looks for themselves or other students to model.

Students on the BA (Hons) Fashion Communication explore creative styling techniques through a teaching and learning project that uses the independent publication *Display Copy* (2024) as a model. The publication is dedicated to showcasing and elevating vintage and upcycled fashion, aiming to disrupt the perception and consumption of fashion. It is used by staff on the programme to introduce concepts of styling and curation of preloved garments to encourage reflection on circularity and personal style.

During the event, the students took on the following roles: stylist, model, social media representative, repair station, makeup artist, photographers and backstage prep. Working with second-hand clothing required improvisation, and conventions were stretched – coats became skirts, shirts became headwear. Alongside this, the event also encouraged the ordinary – the striped t-shirt and jeans, the simple black dress.

The repair corner was manned by five students, using repair techniques from *bojagi* (South Korean) to *sasiko* (Japanese) to applique. The repairs became culturally rich and told stories about their background and interests. During the event, the community and students held conversations that reflected their shared experiences of garment repair.

Images 4 & 5 – Chopwell Regeneration Shop Launch. Photo credit: G. Cantrell.

Fifteen students walked the catwalk, demonstrating how the preloved clothing could be worn, and a pop-up photography studio captured the outfits created. Garments were sold to raise money for the Chopwell Regeneration Group.

The initiative presented an opportunity to disrupt traditional fashion structures, directly using clothing, styling and repair to build awareness and implement a future scope for jobs within a community centring

around the circular economy. The circular economy relies on three key principles: eliminate waste and pollution, circulate products and materials and regenerate nature (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022). The grander scale of the circular economy is not fully addressed by The Regeneration Shop, but as a small and localised system, it is able to use these principles to repair (fixing and extending the life of a garment) or remanufacture used garments, taking them out of the waste stream, circulating them back into use and using sales and skills to regenerate their community when doing so. Through this experiential learning platform, the students experienced their value firsthand, seeing the direct significance their skills brought to the project and the impact clothing repair, resale and remanufacture could have on this local community.

Remanufacturing is outlined by Nasr and Thurston (2006, p. 16) as "the process of disassembling, cleaning, inspecting, repairing, replacing, and reassembling the components of a part or product in order to return it to as-new condition" – using old goods to create new goods. Traditionally the remit of remanufacture sits more commonly with industrial manufacturers, one of which is the automobile industry (Stahel, 2019); however, we are seeing increased research into the development of garment remanufacturing (Wetherell et al., 2023). Different types of garment remanufacturing are noted by Niinimäki (2018): invisible remanufacturing (hidden details are added or amended), visible remanufacturing (visible details are added or amended) and design-led remanufacturing, where waste streams are used to design new garments. Chopwell are looking to do the latter by taking unwanted or damaged goods and using local ideas and skills to redesign and rebuild new goods to sell.

Project impact and outcomes
The feedback from the Chopwell Regeneration Group and the Chopwell community has been extremely positive, and money raised through garment sales on the night will help fund training in the repair and remanufacture of clothing. Following on from this project, The Regeneration Shop is looking to explore knowledge exchange, using staff and students to help upskill the community and provide advice around repair and remanufacture. One-off events or workshops could address issues like dementia, accessible fashion, including adapted clothing for people with disabilities, and sessions which are appealing to men (challenging stereotypes of women repairing clothes and men repairing electricals and tools). The next steps for the project include a series of pop-up styling workshops using preloved garments; garment repair workshops to share ideas and skills between students and the community and cataloguing garment "stories" through an exhibition or publication.

From a teaching and learning perspective, the project was evaluated through student questionnaires before and after the event, with 21 respondents. Through qualitative comments, the students fed back that involvement in the event brought them a lot of satisfaction and pleasure to be involved in community-first ideas: "I am interested in how organisations like the one at Chopwell can facilitate second-hand clothing use and upcycling to benefit the local community and the impact this has". The students welcomed the opportunity to gain experience of styling at a live event: "100000% absolutely love it, the challenges that come with it only make the design process more fun". They also welcomed the opportunity to work with preloved garments and to have the opportunity to put their learning into practice: "Second-hand clothing should become an important part of the design process as we need to become more considerate in our practice and learn how to reuse garments"; and reported great satisfaction at seeing their looks appreciated on the catwalk and through discussions with community residents.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article has introduced a collaboration between researchers at three HEIs, stemming from a scoping exercise supported by the British Fashion Council (BFC) exploring regional initiatives to enable young creatives to have stable careers in fashion and the arts. Our collaboration came about through a mutual interest in decentralisation of fashion education in the Northeast and as a result of initiatives we have put in place to address some of the challenges within the region and the sector.

Following the initial scoping exercise outlined in the Northeast Project research, the BFC has developed a strategy to pilot four fashion hubs in London, the Northwest, the North East and Glasgow, bringing together BFC patrons, industry, schools, colleges and HEIs, community groups and the Prince's Trust. The aim is to create a network and guide that demonstrates routes into a career in fashion and operates as a template for other regions. Our intention is to build on these networks and share our knowledge across the HEIs through collaborative research and pedagogical projects that maximise our findings.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of students and graduates who wish to remain in the Northeast, rejecting established pathways to London for education, internships and employment. In the words of one Northumbria student: "Fashion feels like a party to which I will never be invited". We believe we can challenge this belief through collaboration with industry and third-sector partners, supporting alternative routes into learning and broader community engagement.

This article has shown how pathways are being built through schools, industry and HEIs to show students from underrepresented groups the value of pursuing a creative education. It has shown how targeting talent from underrepresented areas through initiatives to enhance access to HE and providing ongoing support can be pivotal in unlocking their potential and fostering social mobility while providing opportunities to support the region's growth. It has demonstrated how teaching and learning projects that combine a reuse/repair approach with community engagement can lead to insights in knowledge exchange and contextualisation of learning.

We acknowledge that our research is in its initial stages and intend to develop a deeper and more robust methodological framework that can be established to underpin our research and provide support to other HEIs, industry and community groups. It has been our intention to highlight where examples of good practice are creating opportunities for a responsible and decentralised approach to fashion education that reflects and supports regional opportunities and the communities that we engage with, to create a responsible and relevant new vision for fashion.

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