

The smart set

How have the students of the new fashion academy fared in its first year?

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"I'm going to educate the team at Jaeger about the different body types" is not, experience suggests, the wisest approach to take for a 19-year-old starting work experience at the posh clothes store. It is on a par, surely, with a medical student interrupting an operation to tell the surgeon that he or she is hacking off the wrong leg.

But Amy Zgraja is a student at the new Fashion Retail Academy, where encouraging teen talent to be bold and "think wild" is very much part of the game.

One by one, the academy's first batch of students are explaining to their course tutor how they are getting on with their final projects, and Zgraja's is not the only one that is going to require a bit of nerve.

Lianne Crossley, 18, for instance, is going to try out a staff development programme of her own devising on the shop walkers at the flagship branch of Topshop in Oxford Street, London, which involves awarding different coloured beads to individuals according to effort. And Laura Vickery, 19, is going to test a training programme she has devised on staff at Jaeger and at Topshop.

But it is Zgraja's plan that seems boldest. She holds up to the group a chart showing the body shapes she wants to teach to staff at Jaeger. There is, for instance, the "apple" who puts on weight around the waist - the actress Drew Barrymore is an example, apparently - and the "pear" (Kate Winslet) and the straight up and down (Keira Knightley) and so forth.

Sizing up the customers

Having shown them these, she proposes to test them. "After a week, I'll pick three random members of staff, give them the different figures and see if they have learned how to dress them," Zgraja says.

Her theory is that being able to size up customers this way might stimulate more suggestions for outfits and combinations than they might otherwise have bought. But surely Jaeger staff know this body-shape stuff already? After all, one woman in the store, according to a student who has done work experience there, regularly earns £1,600 a week in commission on the garments she sells. Zgraja gives a "we'll just see" smile.

These students are all no doubt showing just the sort of flair and chutzpah that Philip Green, boss of the Arcadia fashion chain and a prime mover behind the establishment of the academy, wants from young people.

In late 2004, he announced his plans for a new institution to train young people just out of school in marketing, finance and fashion-buying. "We need to do something to produce the next generation of entrepreneurs," he said.

The 16- and 18-year-old candidates were to be selected "on the basis of enthusiasm and flair, with students showing an interest in fashion, rather than on background and qualifications".

Green, who famously worked his way to the top without academic qualifications, said: "I look for the three As: people should be aware, alert and alive."

Now the academy is approaching the end of its first year of operation. So new is it that it has not yet been able to move into its own home in Gresse Street, off Tottenham Court Road, a building formerly part of Birkbeck College that has needed substantial refurbishing for its new task.

For its first year, the academy has squatted at the London College of Fashion, also situated barely a catwalk's length from Oxford Street.

The 40 students of the opening intake have divided their time between the classroom and work experience. In the classroom, they go through the staple strands of the course - management, merchandising, store operations, range planning etc - and have also been treated to masterclasses from Green, Marks & Spencer boss Stuart Rose, and other senior practitioners from the industry. Each student also gets six periods of hands-on work experience spread over the year.

"What is wonderful is the integration of work-based and academic learning," says Dr Julia Gaimster, the academy's head. "It's a formula that's truly supported by the industry and it gives the students fantastic networking opportunities."

The students wholeheartedly endorse this, particularly the benefits of the two-week stints working in big stores in the Arcadia group and beyond, and the networking this affords.

"We would never have been able to do work experience in Selfridge's or do placements in Arcadia head office," says Anna Shahatit, 19.

Of the students, the 22 in the older age bracket have been doing a course for a level 3 ABC (Awarding Body Consortium) diploma in fashion retail, and the 18 younger students have been working towards its level 2 counterpart. These 18 will do the level 3 course next year, when the student body will rise to 200.

By and large the students - only five of whom are male - are living at home and come from the southern half of England, albeit from Ipswich, Northampton and Coventry. A handful have come from further away, such as Lindsay Gilmartin, 19, who has moved down from Glasgow and has landed a management training place with Topshop. Of the level 3 students, seven have already been offered places on the Arcadia retail management training programme that starts in September.

"They will fast-track within 12 months to a store manager's position," says Alison Bending, Arcadia's training programme manager. Most big retailers exclusively recruit graduates to train for management in their retail stores and such head-office roles as buying, merchandising, human resources and public relations. And even for such trainees starting from the bottom, it might be two or three years before they get to a store manager's job.

The level 3 intake all came with A-levels or their equivalent, and some threw over university places to take a punt with the fledgling institute.

Thalia Andreou, 19, recalls her mother's annoyance at her last-minute decision to come to the academy instead of doing a fashion design degree.

An insight into retail

Like the other students, Andreou does not regret her decision. She is now bent on pursuing a career in visual merchandising. "I didn't even know what visual merchandising was when I came here. I just knew there were people in stores who dressed windows. This has given me a real insight into what fashion retail is."

Her experience is echoed by the others. "When they started, a high proportion would have said they wanted to be buyers - not many would say that now," says Bending. "They had a perception that a buyer was a glamorous role involving a lot of foreign travel."

Some have been enthused by areas of fashion retail they never knew existed. To the delight of security staff, one of the students, Jo Blande, 17, looks likely to pursue a career in loss prevention, a role dedicated to stemming theft.

The evident enthusiasm for the academy from the students is not matched everywhere. Opposition to the academy project within the general further education sector, where some see it as a diversion of funds that should go to colleges, is well known.

The government put £10m into the project and the public purse will pay for tuition. The rest of the £20m start-up cost has come - in order of size of donation - from Arcadia, Marks & Spencer, Next and GUS, the retail services group.

Some might wonder whether, given the numbers of students offered jobs by Arcadia, the academy - though quite independently run - is turning out to be a glorified recruiting ground for the retail giant, paid for by the taxpayer.

Most work placements have been offered by Arcadia in this first year, says Bending. But as student numbers increase from September, the number of other companies getting involved will also grow.

"The students are independent learners. They have a free choice of whom they go to work for," says Gaimster.

NB – On offer as pilot in one centre only. ABC centres will be eligible to seek scheme approval to offer this qualification in October 2007.