

# From Istanbul to New York: Bi-Cultural Learning Experience in Fashion Design

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**Abstract** – The dual-diploma programs between the State University of New York (SUNY) and Turkish Universities is an example of collaborative international education or dual diploma education between two institutions in two different countries as a new approach of bi-cultural learning. This study explores the dual-diploma Fashion Design Program between Istanbul Technical University (Istanbul, Turkey) and Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY (New York, U.S.A.). The paper investigates the experiences of the graduates with the aim of understating the motivation behind studying in such programs, opportunities and challenges faced by students and the impact of the bi-cultural learning experience after graduation.

**Keywords** – Fashion Design, Education, International, Dual Diploma

## I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has experienced increased emphasis upon internationalism and learning in a global community. Institutions have integrated international opportunities for their students in different forms such as study abroad and exchange programs throughout their curricula. There are a variety of collaborative international models in higher education [1]:

1. Short Term Visits: Academic faculty led short term visits to another country as a part of a specific course or subject, usually undertaken in breaks and do not exceed 2 weeks.
2. Study Abroad: Students continue their major at another international institution for a semester or a full year towards a specific degree. Erasmus exchange programs in Europe provide such mobility for students in higher education.
3. Collaborative International Programs: Joint or double degree higher education programs fall under this category. In this case, higher education institutions in two different countries collaborate and students meet the requirements of both institutions and get a graduation certificate signed by both participating institutions.

The dual-diploma programs between the State University of New York (SUNY) and Turkish Universities is an example of collaborative international education or dual diploma education between two institutions in two different countries as a new approach of bi-cultural learning. The dual-diploma education models change depending on one or two-way exchange of students, number of participating institutions and the number of years required in each institution.

The dual-diploma Fashion Design Program between Istanbul Technical University (Istanbul, Turkey) and Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY (New York, U.S.A.) is an example of one-way dual diploma program model where Fashion design students from Istanbul Technical University (ITU) spend 4 semesters of their education in Fashion Institute

of Technology (FIT), New York and 5 semesters at ITU, Istanbul. The dual-diploma Fashion Design program between ITU and FIT accepted its first students in 2004 and has been giving graduates since 2008. The dual-diploma program brings together two significant metropolises and institutions with distinct characteristics. Istanbul as an emerging global city is the fashion capital of Turkey hosting International Fashion Week, Premiere Vision and clusters of textile and apparel manufacturers from SMEs and large corporations to small avant-garde designer boutiques. Istanbul Technical University (ITU) is a leading state university in Turkey with a strong academic background in engineering and architecture. On the other hand, New York is a global fashion capital influencing international fashion trends and is home to editors, publishers, buyers and designers shaping the future of fashion. Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) is ranked among the top fashion schools of the world with an urban campus located in New York's garment district.

The available literature on SUNY dual diploma higher education programs analysed the cost-benefit comparison, cultural adjustment problems of students and linguistic challenges for students in different majors. Nader and Robbert conducted a cost-benefit analysis of international dual diploma programs for undergraduate and graduate students [1]. The study concluded that dual diploma programs provide superior academic and experiential learning and prepare students to lead global ventures. Yildirim studied Turkish students' adjustment problems in dual diploma programs [2]. Results showed that language proficiency such as writing and understanding in English language, socio-cultural differences and differences between expectations of institutions were among the most challenging factors for Turkish students in dual diploma programs. Another study investigated the dual diploma programs in different countries comparatively [3]. It is reported that dual diploma programs in Turkey faced greater challenges in language and cultural differences compared to China, South Korea, France and Germany. The results also

showed that dual diploma programs in Turkey are challenged by level of student enrolment consistent with expectations, and by commitment level and expectations of partners.

This study investigates the experiences of the graduates of the dual diploma Fashion Design program between ITU and FIT with the aim of understating the motivation behind studying in such program, opportunities and challenges faced by students and the impact of the bi-cultural learning experience after graduation. The study would contribute to the current body of knowledge by focusing on learning experience of an applied field like Fashion Design in a dual diploma program.

## II. METHOD

Data collection is conducted through a survey and face-to-face interviews with graduates of ITU-FIT dual-diploma program.

A total of 42 responses were collected out of approximately 90 graduates (response rate 46%). Cognitive and affective learning as described by Lashari et al. is investigated with the survey [4]. Cognitive aspects relate to learning results in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills. For fashion design education, major cognitive learning subjects include skills about garment construction, garment pattern design, product design and knowledge of textile science. Affective aspects relate to feelings and emotional state that effect the progression of a learning process. Design consciousness, awareness of global structure of apparel and textile industry, time management and team work are among the most important affective aspects in fashion design education.

The survey questions included open ended and 5-point Likert-type scale (1: very positive to 5: very negative) questions on:

1. demographic information,
2. motivation in pursuing a Fashion Design degree in a dual-diploma program,
3. Program's impact on cognitive skills (i.e. garment construction), affective skills (i.e. design consciousness), and finding the first job and job satisfaction after graduation,
4. Challenges and opportunities faced during the education and after graduation.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 7 graduates about their learning experiences in a dual diploma program and how they pursued their career after graduation.

The survey results were analysed using SPSS® statistical analysis software. The interview results were analysed by coding repeating concepts under descriptive titles.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results from the survey showed that that getting a Bachelor's degree from two prestigious institutions and opportunity to study in U.S.A were the top reasons for studying at ITU-FIT dual diploma Fashion Design program. The faculty and facilities (machinery, studios, etc.) of the program were the two following motivation factors.

According to the findings from interviews, students find admission to FIT more competitive as an international student and see the dual-degree program as an opportunity to get FIT diploma. On the other hand, ITU competes to be one of the top state universities in Turkey and its graduates are highly

demanding in the industry. An interviewee described that the only way she could convince her parents to get education in Fashion Design was because it was offered at ITU.

The survey results showed studying at ITU-FIT program had positive impact in affective skills such as design consciousness (M: 1.86, SD:1.06), awareness of global structure of textiles and apparel field (M: 2.14, SD: 0.89), time management (M: 2.14, SD:1.04) and did not impact teamwork skills as much (M: 3.43, SD:1.01).

Table 1. Survey Results for Affective Skills

Affective Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation
Design consciousness	1.86	1.06
Awareness of global structure of textiles and apparel field	2.14	0.89
Time management	2.14	1.04
Team work	3.43	1.01

Cognitive skills such as garment construction (M:1.71, SD:1.01), pattern design (M: 1.86 SD:0.80) and product design and textile knowledge (M:2.57, SD:0.97) were all scored positively.

Table 2. Survey Results for Cognitive Skills

Cognitive Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation
Garment Construction	1.71	1.01
Pattern Design	1.86	0.80
Product Design	2.57	0.97
Textile Science	2.57	0.97

66.3% of respondents stated that being graduate of a dual-diploma program had positive impact in finding their first jobs. 16.3% were neutral and 16.3% stated that it had no impact.

Table 3. Survey Results for Finding First Job

The effect of being graduate of a dual-diploma program in finding first jobs	Percentage
Positive Impact	66.3%
No Impact	32.9%

50% of respondents reported that being graduate of a dual-diploma program had no impact in meeting their salary expectations in their first jobs, 16.3% were neutral and 33.6% stated it had positive impact.

Table 4. Survey Results for Meeting Salary Expectations

The effect of being graduate of a dual-diploma program in meeting salary expectations	Percentage
Positive Impact	33.6%
No Impact	66.3%

According to the open ended survey questions and interview results, it is seen that graduates of the program pursued their careers in different directions nationally and internationally. Considering Turkey's position as a significant global textile and apparel exporter, a group of graduates took over family businesses in the field. Especially, award-winning graduates in competitions started their own local brands. Many graduates are employed in leading local apparel companies appealing both local and international markets. Several

graduates launched their own brands in the US: Tuncin.Ege and AlienvsHuman operating in menswear and womenswear are selling online and through designer agent showrooms.

Graduates interviewed reported that studying in a dual diploma program, being immersed in different aspects of fashion business in two different fashion centers of the world have provided a global vision and increased their design consciousness and awareness of market competitiveness. Interviewees emphasized how much street style in New York influenced their style as a designer and inspired them. Being situated within the fashion industry cluster in New York, graduates were able to find access to the latest international fashion happenings. Availability of wide range of museums and The Museum at FIT were other highly cited aspects in increasing graduate's design consciousness. Dual-diploma program students all had the opportunity to work for one year in the U.S. after graduation. Thus, interviewees emphasized that they had the opportunity to build international competence and develop an understanding of the competitiveness in the field.

In addition to all the opportunities offered by studying fashion design in two different metropolises like New York and Istanbul, graduates described common challenges they faced after graduation. One major challenge for graduates was working conditions in the apparel and textiles industry in Istanbul once they return. Interviewees all stated that many of the companies do not have the genuine and creative design competency they were educated for and industry demands long working hours without much benefits.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Fashion design as an industry has been reshaped by forces of globalization, availability of digital social media and thus changing consumer expectations. The ability to communicate effectively in a cross-functional and cross-cultural team is an increasingly important skill required for fashion designers. In this context, fashion design education needs to adequately prepare students for the shifting fashion landscape. The dual diploma Fashion Design program between ITU and FIT illustrates an interesting example for educating fashion designers bi-culturally in two leading institutions and leading fashion and textile centers of the world; New York and Istanbul.

This study investigated the experiences of students graduated from the ITU-FIT dual diploma program to understand the motivation behind studying fashion design in a dual diploma program, the impact of graduating from a dual diploma fashion design program and opportunities and challenges for students during their education and after graduation. Studying fashion design in two leading institutions in Istanbul and New York provides a global vision for fashion design students and increases their international competence. In addition, being exposed to fashion education and fashion related happenings in two different countries increase their awareness of market competitiveness. The street style in New York, availability of wide range of museums and access to latest international fashion happenings increase the dual diploma students' design consciousness. Students of the dual diploma program report positive impact in finding their first jobs. Most students return to their home countries and either take over family businesses in fashion, start their own brands

or work in nationally and internationally known fashion companies. Small portion of the graduates pursue their careers in the U.S. In addition to the positive impact of studying fashion design in a dual diploma program, graduates reported frustrations related to working conditions in fashion design industry once they return to Istanbul such as the demanding work hours without much benefits. Another major frustration articulated by graduates was the lack of genuine and creative design competency in the fashion design industry in Istanbul.

In conclusion, although studying fashion design in a competitive dual diploma program offers many opportunities, gaps and dilemmas exist between the expectations and conditions of the fashion design industry in different geographical locations and the education received by graduates.

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