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Nottingham Trent
University

Sustainable & Circular skills

Recommendations for the fashion and textile industry
and education



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Foreword

Companies across the UK fashion and textile sector are embracing the move to a more circular business model. However, making that change is very challenging. Supply chains are complex, the goalposts continue to shift, the legislative landscape is evolving, and many companies either do not have dedicated experts or rely on people who have learned on the job.

This report is based on collaboration between academic experts and industry practitioners. The key findings have been developed with professionals currently working in the field, who understand both the skills required today and those that will be needed in the future.

There have already been advances in integrating 'green' skills into the current skills system. National Occupational Standards have been updated to include sustainability, and many universities now teach these skills to undergraduates.

However, to maintain progress towards a more circular fashion and textile industry, a broader approach to sustainability skills is needed. This should combine technical knowledge with cross-functional capabilities, alongside greater exposure to manufacturing and stronger knowledge networks. A coordinated approach is also required to deliver these skills both to the existing workforce and to those entering the industry.

As the Sector Skills Body for the fashion and textile industry, UKFT was pleased to be part of this collaborative work. The recommendations in this report provide a clear pathway towards a unified, industry-endorsed framework for circular and sustainable skills.



Adam Mansell
Chief Executive Officer
UK Fashion & Textile Association

Introduction

This report aims to provide feasible and impactful recommendations to address sustainable and circular skills across the UK fashion and textile sector. It results from research completed for the 'Back to Baselines' (B2B) project and is part of the Circular Fashion and Textile Network Plus. Its overarching aim is to establish scientifically validated environmental baselines for the fashion and textile sector, enabling robust assessment of innovations and supporting more sustainable and circular industry development. Within B2B, five thematic areas (TA) explore distinct aspects of the sector. TA4, co-led by Amanda Briggs-Goode and Adam Mansell, focuses specifically on skills needs and gaps, examining how education and industry can be better aligned across professional, educational and lifelong learning domains.

The core objective of TA4 is to understand the skills gaps and emerging needs across the fashion and textile sector and to evaluate how well current education provision aligns with industry requirements. A review of existing literature revealed limited clarity on how sustainable and circular skills are being embedded and operationalised within curricula and similarly limited definition from industry regarding the specific competencies required. This combination of unclear expectations and documented skills deficits highlights the urgency of strengthening the alignment between education and industry practice.

To address this, the B2B project mapped industry skills requirements, assessed workforce readiness and examined the coherence of the wider educational pipeline. Primary research was undertaken through interviews and focus groups with 48 industry stakeholders, spanning the supply chain (from farming and manufacturing to retail, brands, recycling, repair and policy roles), job functions (including CEOs, Technical Directors, Designers, Buyers, CSR leads, Heads of Sustainability and Materials, Directors of Skills and Training, Entrepreneurs and Recycling Managers) and across business scales from micro enterprises to multi-nationals. Educators contributed perspectives from 19 individuals across schools, further and higher education, and continuing professional development. Taken together, these insights revealed a fragmented skills ecosystem with shared aspirations but uneven capacity to deliver them. While this is extensive, this does not demonstrate the full diversity of the sector, perspectives from areas such as uniforms, technical and medical, automotive and home were beyond the scope of this phase but have been identified as important for future research.

Following the development of initial recommendations, feedback was gathered from industry professionals through two workshops to refine and strengthen the final outputs. The research concludes that future skills development across the sector requires renewed alignment and focused attention across four domains: Technical, Specialist, Cross-Functional and Behavioural competencies. This Policy change is needed now to address the widening skill gaps ensuring the sector's future resilience and its insights form the recommendations presented.



Industry context



Industry context

The UK fashion and textile sector contributes £62 billion in gross value added and supports 1.3 million jobs relying on a myriad of skills, knowledge and technologies. There are urgent calls for the fashion and textile industry to transition from a linear model to a circular economy, widely proposed as a more sustainable model to address the climate crisis. Skills deficits within the 'creating and making' workforce for the linear economy have been previously identified, with several disruptors cited as affecting the employment pipeline: an aging workforce, offshoring, education/industry misalignment, undervalued pay, reduced school Design and Technology curricula, Brexit, immigration policies and Covid 19. In addition, the fashion and textile sector is comprised of a high proportion of SMEs, who report that the administrative burden of accessing financial support from government for apprenticeships, for example, privileges larger businesses.

While sustainable and circular has become central to discussions, the specific skills required to enact them remain poorly defined and inconsistently developed. This makes it difficult for businesses to gauge the scale of change needed or the potential benefits. Legislative uncertainty and the proliferation of eco-credential schemes further complicate matters, and the positioning of sustainable and circular responsibilities within organisations can distort understanding of the skill set needed for meaningful change. As a result, businesses may hesitate to invest in training, worsening existing skills gaps. The combined pace of environmental regulation, technological change and societal expectation means the current skills infrastructure can no longer keep pace with industry needs.

Industry participants emphasised that ongoing ambiguity surrounding what sustainable and circular skills means in practice is compounded by structural barriers such as limited infrastructure, inconsistent terminology and insufficient funding for circular initiatives.

Employers increasingly expect material literacy, technical competence, systems thinking and awareness of emerging legislation. However, few job descriptions currently articulate these expectations explicitly reflecting the industry's still cautious and incremental approach to circularity. Without intervention, the sector risks widening skills shortages, reduced competitiveness and missed opportunities for leadership in global sustainable and circular innovation.

In addition, the fractured nature of the UK fashion and textile sector, largely driven by offshoring, means that early career employees often have limited oversight of the full supply chain. This lack of visibility contributes to siloed understanding and constrains the ability to understand the impact of their decisions or apply sustainable and circular principles.

As legislative, environmental and societal pressures increase, a robust future facing skills ecosystem is essential to address the current and emerging gaps. Building this ecosystem requires structural, cultural and policy-level commitments across the sector and within education. Collaboration and recognition of the interdependencies across the talent pipeline are vital for supporting the next generation of skilled employees.

It is in this spirit that we have developed these recommendations; the purpose of this policy is to provide a clear evidence-based sustainable and circular framework for developing the skills required to support a thriving fashion and textile sector.

Overview of skills & findings

The UK does not currently have a unified skills framework that brings together education and industry, resulting in a lack of coherence and consistently applied terminology. The categories used in this report are taken from a **UK government report** on establishing a clear skills classification system.

SKILLS – SPECIALIST **S**

Specialist skills are defined as “*expertise and competence in a narrow, specific area or field.*” In the context of sustainable and circular, they include analytical skills needed for legal compliance, environmental accreditation, monitoring and reporting and product lifecycle thinking skills and general sustainability knowledge.

Insights:

- **Changing legislation:** The evolving legislative landscape (e.g. EPR, DPP) means companies need legal understanding skills to interpret new requirements and adapt appropriately.
- **Widening gap around analytic skills:** Legislation, environmental accreditation and evidence for ‘green claims’ requires data gathering, management and reporting skills, both for legal compliance and to maintain public trust.
- **Life cycle thinking skills and systems thinking:** A greater focus on complete product lifecycle including durability, repair, recyclability, particularly required at design and development stages.

SKILLS – TECHNICAL **T**

Technical skills are defined as “*capabilities required to perform practical or cognitive tasks, often related to science, engineering, IT, construction, and production.*” In the context of sustainable and circular, they include understanding of the materials, processes and testing requirements and procedures for the manufacture of textiles and garments.

Insights:

- **Pipeline Issues:** Changes to GCSE and A-Level textile curricula have reduced student interest in textiles at Further Education and Higher Education levels.
- **Curriculum Changes:** Decline in technically focused courses and curricula within HE and an increase in the creative content in design and business focused courses.
- **Access to Manufacturing and Supply Chain:** Offshoring limits exposure for students and employees, reducing awareness and hindering onboarding for sourcing, buying, and design roles. Lack of early access is problematic as later stage upskilling is harder.



SKILLS – CROSS FUNCTIONAL **CF**

Cross-functional skills are defined as “capabilities applicable across different jobs, enabling collaboration and adaptability.” In the context of sustainable and circular, they include collaboration within and between organisations and across lifecycle chain, work across silos and future thinking to implement change.

Insights:

- **Cross-functional collaboration:** sustainable and circular sits across all business functions, so collaboration is required to make progress. Without nominated individuals with cross functional skills, access and time, sustainable and circular delivery can fragment across strategic, managerial, and operational levels.
- **Interdisciplinary Communication:** Professionals need baseline understanding and shared language to engage with engineers, scientists and AI specialists to integrate new technology, enabled by exposure to interdisciplinary environments within education.
- **Adaptability and future thinking:** Frequent updates in eco-credentials, legislation, and innovation demands agility and the ability to see sustainability as a business opportunity. Enhanced skills are required to respond to current and future needs and navigate uncertainty.

SKILLS – BEHAVIOURAL **B**

Behavioural skills are defined as “interpersonal and self-management capabilities that influence how individuals interact and work with others.” In the context of sustainable and circular, they include communication, negotiation, persuasion and resilience alongside the ability to reflect and act on business and individual values, resolving conflicts of interest and trade-offs are required.

Insights:

- **Influencing Skills:** Greater requirement to persuade effectively, including communicating nuance, repetition, appropriate timing and tone so sustainability values translate to real world change.
- **Leadership Engagement:** Deep change requires C-suite buy-in and clear sustainability values, plus time for innovation and reflection. Sustainable and circular are often treated as compliance rather than value-led strategic priorities.
- **Informal Communication:** Lack of time and physical access to informal conversations to create common understanding in businesses and across supply chain.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are linked to the categories using the initial of each category.

Recommendation 1 - Increase exposure to manufacturing as training for brands, retailers, and education by coordinating across the UK supply chain.**T** **CF**

Increasing exposure to UK manufacturing and recycling environments facilitates knowledge exchange, giving brands, retailers and students more opportunities to understand how materials and finished goods are made. Attempts to transition to a more sustainable and circular industry must be built on a strong understanding of the practical challenges and viable alternatives through enhanced understanding of materials and manufacturing. In the Industry interviews, technical skills were repeatedly cited as the most pressing need to enable the industry to function and evolve. This could involve hands on learning, visits to manufacturing sites, and reciprocal visits from manufacturers to other stakeholders, coordinated by UKFT across its membership. The recommendation encourages closer partnerships, so the UK industry gains shared insight and builds skills grounded in real manufacturing practice.

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What I would love, is that every buyer, every designer, everyone who whose role touched product had an awareness of the impact of the decisions that they make.





Shaping the Future Skills for a Circular Fashion & Textile Industry workshop

Recommendation 2 - Review and extend your networking across all lifecycle stages and participate in open forums supporting the shift from sustainable and circular theory to practical application.

T CF B

Reviewing and extending your networking means building stronger connections through participation in open forums for collaboration, internally across business functions and externally throughout the lifecycle chain. Sustainability and circularity require consideration and understanding of all lifecycle stages. By engaging with a wider range of partners and joining open forums, you gain practical insights, share challenges, and learn from real world examples of sustainable and circular practices. Industry experts frequently highlighted about collaboration as a key enabler. This could take the form of participation in industry initiatives (UKFT, WRAP), pilot projects and research, and attendance of networking events. This recommendation encourages businesses to move beyond theory, collaborate actively, and tap into collective expertise to influence that can accelerate the shift towards practical, sustainable and circular solutions.

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There are loads of retailers and brands, you’ve got manufacturers, you’ve got government, universities, they all come together and talk about different sustainability topics. And that is a safe space, it’s not competitive. It’s a safe space to share challenges.

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Our biggest enabler would be cross sharing with other retailers and journeys.

Recommendation 3 - Optimise your use of legislation and compliance support through UKFT or other relevant bodies.

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Optimising your use of legislation and compliance support means taking advantage of guidance, tools and expertise offered by UKFT and other relevant bodies to stay ahead of regulatory change. Enhancing your organisations data gathering, management and reporting skills helps to embed environmental best practices, supports strategic sustainability planning and builds public trust through traceability, transparency and evidence for product claims. The challenges of keeping up to date with the rapidly evolving legislative landscape, particularly acute for SMEs, and ‘green hushing’ due to fear of public criticism were frequently cited. This recommendation encourages businesses to proactively engage with available resources—such as compliance updates, training, and advisory services—to better understand requirements around sustainability, circularity, and product standards. By doing so, you can reduce risk, avoid unnecessary costs, and ensure your operations, products and processes remain compliant and future ready.

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It’s incredibly difficult to keep up to date with everything that is coming out and then understand the impact.

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More brands are reaching out to consultancies to get legal advice on things like EPR schemes because they’re so broad across all the different markets. When I see job roles coming up, a lot of it is and we need you to advise the business and make us compliant across everything globally. And I don’t know if anyone’s achieving that and finding anyone who can do it.

Recommendation 4 - Use strategic KPIs to drive and embed sustainable and circular skills development.

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Using strategic KPIs means setting clear, measurable indicators that track how well your business is developing sustainable and circular skills considering the Technical, Specialist, Cross -Functional and Behavioural categories indicated in this document. By linking training, performance reviews and team objectives to these KPIs supported by senior leadership, you signal that sustainability capabilities are a core priority. The interviews highlight the importance of KPIs and management support for sustainable and circular transition, which should therefore be extended to include CPD. This recommendation helps embed circular thinking into everyday work, ensures progress is monitored consistently, and supports accountability across departments. It enables businesses to understand where skills gaps remain and to invest in the right areas to drive long-term, sustainable growth and circular innovation.

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There needs to be a commitment to embed circularity, which means there needs to be a way to measure it. It needs to be within the goals and objectives or at every level of the organisation.

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If the C-Suite is not supporting it, it's very hard to move it. It's a top-down conversation and you need the CEOs to really embrace it.

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There has to be alignment on the goals...there has to be accountability. So, after every season, all stakeholders should be sitting around the table to say, OK, this is what we've committed to. This is where we have achieved. So have we met our commitment, or have we not met our commitment and if we have not met our commitment, what can we do in the future to come closer to the goal or meet that goal or exceed the goal?

Recommendation 5 - Raise awareness of the importance of behavioural and cross-functional skills for sustainability and circularity and provide training in businesses.

CF B

Raising awareness of behavioural and cross-functional skills means helping teams understand that for sustainable and circular transition, mindsets and ways of working are as important as technical knowledge. People who can envisage solutions, persuade others, negotiate compromises and be resilient in the face of setbacks are needed to turn sustainability and circularity theory into action. The interviews highlighted a clear gap: behavioural and cross-functional skills are critical for sustainability work yet frequently overlooked in practice. This recommendation could be delivered through sustainability champions highlighting the importance of these skills and micro-accreditations, team projects or other forms of CPD for behavioural and cross-functional skills framed around sustainability and circularity. The recommendation encourages promotion of these skills and provision of targeted training, helping businesses to build a workforce that can collaborate across departments and stakeholders to drive change.

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It's the only way to make things work in big business, probably even a small SME, is to get everybody involved because at some point you're going to need everybody's support. But that collaboration piece is just so important.

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You're constantly hit with blockers and you just have to keep fighting. And eventually it does pay off, but I think sustainability in general, you have to be a resilient individual to work in that space.

Recommendation 6 - Business investment in sustainable and circular skills as future proofing for your business.

CF B

Business investment of time and resources in the four areas of sustainable and circular skills means building the human capital your business needs to stay competitive as the industry shifts towards a sustainable and circular model. When embraced sustainability and circularity can be good for business as well as good for the environment. This recommendation could be delivered by investing in staff training in the specialist areas of circular design, material efficiency, responsible sourcing, and reuse or recycling processes, as well as the cross-functional and behavioural skills necessary to translate theory into action. The recommendation encourages businesses to be proactive rather than reactive, to mitigate risks, ensure regulatory compliance, unlock new economic opportunities and promote employee engagement.

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We're doing this to future proof the business. We're doing this because we will not survive commercially if we don't embrace the changes that are coming. And I think from a commerciality perspective and from a buying team perspective, they start to understand we're unlocking the future.

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If it's not good for business, there is no chance it's going to be applied.



Shaping the Future Skills for a Circular Fashion & Textile Industry workshop, February 2026

Recommendation 7 - Review your business' current and future sustainable and circular skills needs across the four identified skills gaps, and include them when writing recruitment materials, alongside core role specific requirements.

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Reviewing your current and future sustainable and circular skills needs means assessing the technical, specialist, cross-functional and behavioural skills your business requires to support sustainable transitions. While specialist roles require enhanced skills, a general level sustainability and circularity skills and knowledge are beneficial throughout an organisation. Change is facilitated by everyone being onboard. This recommendation could be delivered by conducting skills audits of teams combined with future skills mapping. By ensuring recruitment material reflect both sustainability and circularity expectations and core role requirements, organisations can attract candidates with these 'nice to have' skills. This recommendation supports long-term business resilience, embedding sustainable and circular thinking across teams.

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If we want the industry to come back here, then at the moment it's not going to work because we don't have the workforce to fill what's needed.

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Everyone should be the specialist in the area that they're in, but we should all understand the basic principles of what we work to.



UKFT Futures Careers Fair

Educational context



Educational context

Educators highlighted significant constraints across the fashion and textile skills pipeline. These include reduced exposure to textiles in schools, falling enrolments in specialist and technical courses, uneven staff expertise related to sustainable and circular, and cohort sizes that limit hands on learning. As a result, many students enter higher education with conceptual awareness of sustainability but limited technical skills and confidence in material-based processes.

Across higher education, student interest has shifted towards business focused disciplines, particularly marketing, communication and promotion courses, at the expense of courses centred on technical making and material understanding. The decline of Design and Technology education in schools, including a reduction in GCSE Textiles, has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of students progressing into specialist and technical Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) courses, despite A-Level Textiles remaining available. This trend is intensified by a lack of informed career guidance, where limited understanding of fashion and textile pathways and roles constrains student awareness of viable career routes. Apprenticeship provisions remain comparatively limited, further narrowing opportunities for technical progression. The introduction of T-Levels (Technical) has also proven challenging for the creative industries, with SMEs reporting limited capacity to meet complex placement and systems requirements.

These pressures have led to the closure of many technical and vocational courses, alongside a reduction in technical content within existing curricula. Educators report challenges in maintaining specialist provision and ensuring learners can access sufficient hands on, technical and practical based learning. Consequently, graduates are entering the workforce with reduced understanding of technical and industrial processes at a time when these skills are increasingly critical to sector transformation.

Interviews and focus groups revealed that both industry and education recognise shared priorities but operate within fragmented responsibilities. Aligning educational priorities with workforce needs requires coordinated action to address systemic, resource based and cultural barriers across the full skills pipeline. Collaboration was identified as a critical enabler by both groups; live briefs, internships, guest speakers and industry visits were widely valued for facilitating knowledge exchange and strengthening understanding of real-world contexts. However, access to such opportunities is inconsistent across regions and institutions.

The combined effect of these challenges is a weakened technical skills pipeline that is currently unable to meet the demands of a rapidly changing fashion and textile sector. Addressing this requires clear policy direction to strengthen specialist pathways, enhance industry–education collaboration and rebuild the technical foundations essential for a sustainable, circular and resilient future workforce



Recommendation for Education 1 - Raise awareness of pipeline issues for technical skills linked to education policy; evidence could influence government, exam boards and increased inclusion within curricula.

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Awareness needs to be raised of the growing shortage of technical skills in areas such as manufacturing, product development, and material technologies, and these gaps linked to education policy. By gathering evidence from industry and sharing it with government, exam boards and education providers, the sector can demonstrate where curricula are falling behind industry needs. Raising awareness in this way helps influence future qualifications, ensuring they better reflect the technical, sustainable and circular skills required. This strengthens the talent pipeline and supports a more resilient UK fashion and textile industry.

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We need graduates now to hit the ground and run. So I think if we're employing graduates, I think we need to have graduates that understand the manufacturing processes and the manufacturing pitfalls.



Recommendation for Education 2 - Include basic legislation and data literacy for sustainability and circularity as part of Fashion and Textiles education.

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The Fashion and Textiles industry is undergoing a significant increase in legislation. Students should be made aware, in general terms, of the legislative landscape of the industry they are looking to enter. Learners should be given the opportunity to develop confidence in interpreting data, understanding impact metrics, and using information to make informed decisions. By integrating these skills, educators are equipping graduates with the knowledge and analytical capability needed to support sustainable and circular practices across the sector.

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Some of the elements of eco design for sustainable products regulation that the EU are driving would be so useful to embed within graduates.

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I would love to see anyone who's taking fashion related graduate undergrad scheme in the UK has a really basic level of awareness of kind of fashion legislation and textiles legislation as it's evolving because actually that's the bit that's quite complex and quite hard.

Recommendation for Education 3 - Create sustainable and circular live briefs for students through collaboration between industry and education.

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Live briefs are an excellent way for students to get direct exposure to the needs and practices of the Fashion and Textiles industry. By pitching briefs focused on or including sustainability and circularity, students can gain a better understanding of the challenges the industry faces and the opportunity to put sustainability theory into practice. Live briefs give students the chance to develop behavioural and cross-functional skills as well as technical and specialist skills. They also offer a talent pipeline to business and increase students' essential employability skills.

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A tie between industry and university could go down extremely well so that they get to see what happens from raw material, to making a yarn, weaving or knitting and then how it gets put together.

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Students would benefit from more industry understanding, people coming in, talking about how it works, and then asking questions.

Recommendation for Education 4 - Include and scaffold behavioural and cross-functional skills through curricula.

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Behavioural skills such as resilience, negotiation and persuasion and cross-functional skills including adaptability and collaboration should be taught and learning scaffolded through education curricula. Students should be made aware of the importance of these skills for sustainability and circularity to promote their value and provide students the means to talk about these skills in the context of employability.

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The Department of Education report skills shortages in higher skilled, professional and managerial roles in the creative industries, related to soft skills, technical, IT specific, as well as green technologies. Arguing the creative industries relies heavily upon graduates and therefore overemphasises 'entry-level' roles and therefore practical rather than transferable skills, which impacts at mid and senior levels.

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I really try to embed sustainability and those critical thinking in terms of when you are making strategic decisions and making those choices... Universities hold a big responsibility there. So in shifting that change within their course content and also supporting interdisciplinary courses.

Conclusion & next steps

The UK fashion and textile sector stands at a critical moment. As environmental pressures intensify and legislation accelerates, the industry's future is reliant upon sustainable and circular transformation. This report has demonstrated that while the ambition for change is shared across industry and education, current systems are not yet aligned to deliver it. Technical expertise, specialist analytical skills, cross-functional collaboration and behavioural capabilities all play essential roles, yet these areas remain inconsistently embedded across the workforce and the educational pipeline.

Industry participants emphasised the need for strengthened material literacy, improved manufacturing awareness, greater clarity around legislation and enhanced collaboration across supply-chain stages. Educators highlighted declining technical provision, reduced early-stage exposure to textiles and inconsistent opportunities for meaningful industry engagement. Without targeted intervention, the UK risks widening its skills gaps at the precise moment when sustainable and circular literacy is becoming fundamental to competitiveness.

The recommendations in this report provide a practical, evidence-led framework for addressing these gaps. They call for renewed investment in technical training, improved use of legislative support, embedding skills into strategic KPIs, and a shift towards behavioural and cross-functional competencies that enable teams to translate sustainability theory into practice. For education, the priorities include rebuilding technical pathways, integrating foundational sustainability literacy, and expanding industry partnerships to strengthen real-world learning.

NEXT STEPS

1. Sector-wide skills alignment workshops, hosted by UKFT, and to include educators and industry representatives to prioritise recommendations.
2. Initiate a UK fashion and textile sustainable and circular skills framework to create a unified, accessible curriculum to include theory and practice for, education, CPD and workforce planning.
3. Pilot courses across industry and education, test new training models, live briefs, and manufacturing exposure initiatives, capturing impact and scalability.
4. Policy engagement to develop evidence and insights to inform dialogue with government, exam boards and funding bodies to strengthen technical provision and legislative literacy.

By advancing these next steps collaboratively, the UK can build a resilient, future-focused skills ecosystem capable of driving meaningful sustainable and circular, long-term transformation of the sector and meet the needs of People, Planet and Profit.



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