



## Safer Custody Clothing: Designing Garments for Female Prisoners at Risk of Self-Harm

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The 'Safer Custody Clothing' project offered by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to the Manchester Fashion Institute provided a unique collaborative learning experience for both students, staff and industry professionals in relation to garment design, product development and consideration of technical and manufacturing requirements. Five participating students on MA Fashion Innovation completed a project redesigning clothing provided for female prisoners at risk of self-harm or in extreme distress situations.

### Project Background:

Prisoners held in custody may have problems coping with the environment in which they find themselves. Women especially may express their distress through acts of self-harm or attempted suicide and become disruptive, volatile and antagonistic towards both prisoners and staff. For their own protection, such prisoners are removed from the main wings and segregated in special cells which have been adapted to remove all opportunities for harm. For reasons of decency, a specialist garment is required, specifically for women to wear in this environment.

According to Ministry of Justice reports (2017), incidents of suicide and self-harm in UK prisons have increased significantly in recent years. Between September 2015 and 2016, there were 107 suicides in custody, representing an increase of 75% on self-inflicted deaths recorded in 2012. The number of self-harm occurrences increased by 57% during this period; with women more likely to harm themselves than men. Female deaths in custody are more often classified as self-inflicted in comparison to men. Ministry of Justice data indicates that women represent only 5% of the total population in custody but account for 23% of occurrences of self-harm (Bulman, 2017). Because of the sizeable increase in incidents indicated by these statistics, lowering the levels of self-harm and self-inflicted deaths in prisons has become critical to achieving greater stability in prisons. Numerous design considerations were outlined to the student group by HMPPS based on strict policies and procedures regarding safety within prison environment. Clothing provides potential tools for self-inflicted death and self-harm, as components can be stripped down and used as ligatures; therefore, there is a need to provide prisoners at risk of self-harm with a specialist garment which is resistant to deconstruction providing a safe, comfortable and functional solution toward assisting in their rehabilitation.

### Teaching and Learning:

The project aimed to build a meta-learning environment (Winters, 2011) that fostered the students control of their own learning; encouraging self-regulation, self-motivation and reflective practice that enhanced their independence as a learner and confidence in their own creative endeavours. The concept of meta-learning associates itself strongly with design education where

there is need to develop knowledge through applying research, development of practical skills and acquisition of technical expertise (Winters, 2011). This is closely interwoven with MA Fashion Innovations user-centred approaches for the design (Lai, Honda & Yang 2010) and synthesis of solutions that utilise empathic and perceptive research tools to encourage detailed learning about user problems. Students are encouraged to embark on an independent journey of discovery that defines new ideas and generates a series of problems orientated goals.

Goal orientated projects that are setup with 'live' briefs are performance enhancing. The limitations of the project are set by the students. Their inclusivity and involvement in defining the problem, rather than having pre-determined learning outcomes is the key motivation. To deliver to the client and gain approval becomes more important than meeting a deadline and gaining a mark; forming much stronger cognitive engagement with their work and thus, deeper learning (Winters, 2011). For assessment, formative frameworks must be produced that evaluate project participation in defining and developing the outcomes of the project as well as the final outputs themselves. Students should record their process; research decisions made, experiments that worked and failed as well as the artefacts they have produced. They should be encouraged to record and reflect upon their learning journey, so that they can visualise what and how they have learned during the project.

This paper aims to produce a narrative regarding the process and results of the Safer Custody Clothing Project that examines the curriculum strategies, innovative teaching practice and how these approaches enhanced students learning, quality of work, level of creativity and employability.

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