

## Post-2005 Textile, Clothing and Footwear Assistance Arrangements

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My experiences as a small fashion business operator could generally be described as one of frustration and yet this industry is one that I feel passionate about. I have direct contact with consumers and in my role as president of the Fashion Technicians Association Australia, the problems experienced by our members are frequently brought to my attention. Studying online for a design qualification, has also added another dimension to my teaching background. Outlined below, after a brief description, are the observations and hurdles I have encountered developing the SuitsU concept, a fashion project I have been working on for the last 3 years.

SuitsU Pty Ltd is a start-up fashion business, which owns the IP on a piece of technology that classifies and derives patterns for unique human characteristics. It is embedded into design process and a small fashion business model built on a production unit of one. In 2001 the project received registration for the AusIndustry Strategic Investment Program (SIP scheme) specifically designed for innovation in Textile Clothing and Footwear business, but as yet no funding has been received. This is because the SIP thresholds are set for innovation in established TCF enterprises with large turnover and not for smaller or new businesses. Last year I tried another avenue and received assistance under a Federal Government funding initiative to commercialise emerging technologies - COMET Tailored Assistance Plan. The assistance is limited to the technology. The development of the project would be much quicker if it was possible to access funds for process improvement, capital investment and training. But more about the assistance packages later.

The 'shopping for clothes' experience of the average Australian fashion consumer is a challenge. Easier for some, but they are in the minority. I liken the experience to searching for a 4x4 post in a timber yard that has merchandised its product into unmarked colour piles and has established its own independent lengths. Unless you're lucky it takes most of the day and is frustrating and disappointing. Widening the isles between the stacks and offering to carry the purchase to your vehicle

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doesn't address the problem. Is it any wonder then that it has become more satisfying to purchase home ware for the family beach house than buy a garment for yourself?

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It's no secret that apparel spend has failed to maintain its share of the household budget. This is a major problem for fashion businesses and in turn the apparel sector. Individual businesses may survive in the short term with cost and operation efficiencies. Innovation in product and diversity of design will also help as businesses struggle to compete with each other in a younger market. However no major long-term gains will be made in growing the apparel market, without combining improvements with a consumer centric approach, which is mindful of the age demography and competition apparel faces in the market place. Let me explain.

I can cook a sumptuous meal, but I'm not allowed to sell food to the consumer without a license. I can also design a home however I cannot build one without a permit, even as an owner operator. What mockery would be made of the qualifications of architects and their educators if the annual building awards were open and given to, for example an accountant with no industry qualifications? (In TCFL we do!) Apparel competes with other sectors, which have regulations and standards to protect consumers and assist in delivering a consistent quality product into the market place. Apparel spend will continue to loose market share until all stakeholders in the TCFL sector address this issue. And it will require Government legislation.

In Australia a 'frock' shop or 'label' can be established with a business name registration and some capital investment, hopefully not with a mortgage on the family home. It is possible to manufacture and sell garments free of regulation, specification and quality control. It is not surprising then that most of the labour abuse occurs in this sector. This is a global problem. Whilst some attempts have been made to address this in Australia with the 'FairWear' campaign, the vastness of the problem continues to dog the industry. But that's no reason to quit.

Research into automated garment technology for the SuitsU project area has led me to international projects. As a result I have been exposed to other regulatory and

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technologically advanced approaches, which may have far greater impact. For instance, the introduction of some standards into a sizing system that is diverse, allows for complexity of human form and independence of label characteristics. Legislation of compulsory registration in this area would have benefits to industry and education, as well as delivering a consistent and quality product to consumers. It would also act as a conduit that could link a fragmented sector and prepare it for the introduction of body scanning technology. Australia does not have any comparable projects to the E-tailor consortium in Europe and TC2 consortium in US.

Sizing is an issue in our Australian multi cultural society and remains in the too hard basket. We are a small market by global standards. It is easier to design clothes for a coat hanger. Most of them are 45cm wide and require only a shoulder fit! Designing for a body that has bumps and curves without being frumpy is another matter. Product development of fashionable garments that fit and flatter requires skill and training irrespective of the size of the business. Assistance packages that motivate companies to make improvements in this area would go a long way to easing the search for clothes that fit. The market will grow (not shrink) if we get this right.

The SuitsU project has merit. However, it is unlikely that it will receive funding under SIP with the thresholds as they are. I propose that they be amended to accommodate a proportion of small business projects or collaborative / sponsored applications. The majority of fashion businesses are small and they make up 50% of the apparel sector. The rest of the sector is comprised of a small number of large businesses. While it may be easier to administer funds to a small number of recipients, a balanced approach would have far greater impact on the sector. And foster the growth, in my case, of technology and improved tools for small fashion business operations.