

# Establishing an Incubator: Accelerating Sustainable Fashion SMMEs

Shamil Isaacs<sup>1</sup> and Sweta Patnaik<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Technology Station – Clothing & Textiles, CPUT, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Dept of Clothing and Textile Technology, CPUT, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa

[isaacssh@cput.ac.za](mailto:isaacssh@cput.ac.za)

[patnaiks@cput.ac.za](mailto:patnaiks@cput.ac.za)

**Abstract:** The South African Clothing and Textile manufacturing industry has encountered substantial hurdles, notably job losses attributed to imports from regions with lower wage rates and inefficiencies within the value chain, exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. This situation underscores the potential for industry rejuvenation, particularly in light of escalating costs associated with importing clothing, encompassing labour and transportation expenses. A significant impediment to the industry's advancement is the absence of a robust design sector capable of generating innovative designs. The forthcoming research will delve into an exploration of literature pertaining to international fashion incubators, fashion districts, and fashion clusters. The insights gleaned will serve as the foundation for crafting a model aimed at expanding a clothing and fashion technopreneurship hub located in Cape Town, South Africa, with the specific aim of supporting graduates in the fields of clothing, textiles, or fashion. This strategic approach involves active engagement with emerging entrepreneurs to expedite their journey towards achieving pivotal economic objectives such as innovation and sustainability, thereby augmenting their competitive edge. Furthermore, this initiative aids these entrepreneurs in navigating the complexities associated with launching small businesses by facilitating access to pertinent best practices and customized technology support services tailored to their unique requirements.

**Keywords:** Fashion; clothing, Entrepreneurship, SMMEs, Incubators, Sustainable fashion

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## 1. Introduction

The South African clothing sector has come under severe strain over the last few years especially due to low cost imports entering the country from low wage areas. It was reported in the Business Day (Phakathi, 2012) that the clothing sector had been affected by cheap imports from China and that it had then lost at least 50 000 jobs in a period of 10 years. The South African clothing sector has since its early days been mainly production and not designed orientated i.e. companies sent their buyers and designers to the leading European fashion shows, exhibitions and store visits from which they would return to replicate what they saw and try to produce it cheaper. In 2009 the South African Minister of Economic Development, Mr. Ebrahim Patel in an address to the clothing industry employers and labour emphasized that the industry had to develop a new survival strategy which he termed the “high-road of development” (Crotty, 2009). Mr. Patel a former General Secretary of the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union(SACTWU) noted that the opportunities for South Africa was to develop a high value-add industry using one or more factors “that may include quality, design, innovation, new product development, speed-to-market, or short-run production.” One fashion designer can stimulate the creation of many more jobs than one manufacturer. e.g. a leading design centre in Cape Town provides work to at least 30 subcontracting (CMT) firms employing on average 30 people per firm. The paper therefore proposes the establishment of a Fashion Incubator or “Design Park” to develop and grow sustainable emerging fashion designers.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Incubators in the Fashion Industry

Fashion incubators are specialized entities that cater to the unique needs of fashion start-ups. They address specific challenges such as high production costs, supply chain complexities, and the necessity for creative design and marketing strategies (Hausmann & Heinze, 2016).

Mills (2012) notes that business skills taught in design programmes were valuable but “designers who were associated with a fashion incubator reported engaging in what could be described as entrepreneurship education”. In addition, “the incubator experiences were most successful at providing the social capital needed to access start-up resources”. Mills, (2011) in a previous article highlight “the creativity-business tension”. Mills then proposes a “triangular enterprise orientation” as a way to navigate this “creativity-business tension”, viz. the creative enterprise orientation (CEO), the creative business orientation (CBO) and the fashion industry orientation (FIO) as depicted in figure 1.

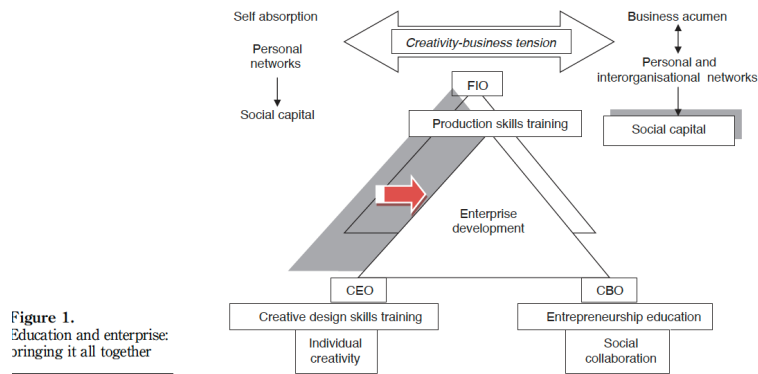


Figure 1. Education and enterprise: bringing it all together

### Figure 1: CBO & FIO

In Figure 1 Mills (2012) to capture the shift and the relationships between the key concepts viz. enterprise orientation, creativity-business tension, social capital, business acumen, individual creativity, design education and collaborative action and entrepreneurship education in the shift from a CEO towards a CBO. Mills (2012) notes that this requires more entrepreneurship education of the sort found in incubators (i.e. education in enterprise) and the shift from CEO to CBO, involves a move from a preoccupation with individual creativity towards collaborative action, which is what is required to innovate (i.e. exploit creative ideas). Fashion incubators offer tailored support, including access to design studios, manufacturing facilities, and industry-specific mentorship. Successful examples include the Fashion Incubator San Francisco and the British Fashion Council's Designer Fashion Fund, which have significantly contributed to the growth of emerging designers (Wong, 2017).

### 2.2 Establishing a Sustainable Fashion Incubator

Establishing a sustainable fashion incubator involves several critical steps:

1. Needs Assessment: Understanding the specific needs of sustainable fashion SMMEs, including resource requirements, market access, and training needs (Peters & Becker, 1999).
2. Funding and Resources: Securing funding from public and private sources, and providing access to sustainable materials, manufacturing facilities, and design tools (Mian et al., 2016).
3. Mentorship and Training: Offering specialized mentorship and training programs focusing on sustainable practices, business management, and market strategies (Schwartz & Hornych, 2010).
4. Networking and Partnerships: Facilitating networking opportunities with industry stakeholders, including suppliers, retailers, and investors, to create a supportive ecosystem (Hausmann & Heinze, 2016).
5. Monitoring and Evaluation: Implementing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of the incubator and continuously improve its services (Bergek & Norrman, 2008).

### 3. Methodology

The paper reviewed literature and websites related to support for SMME fashion designers internationally as well as analysis of current data available from fashion SMME support organisations in Cape Town.

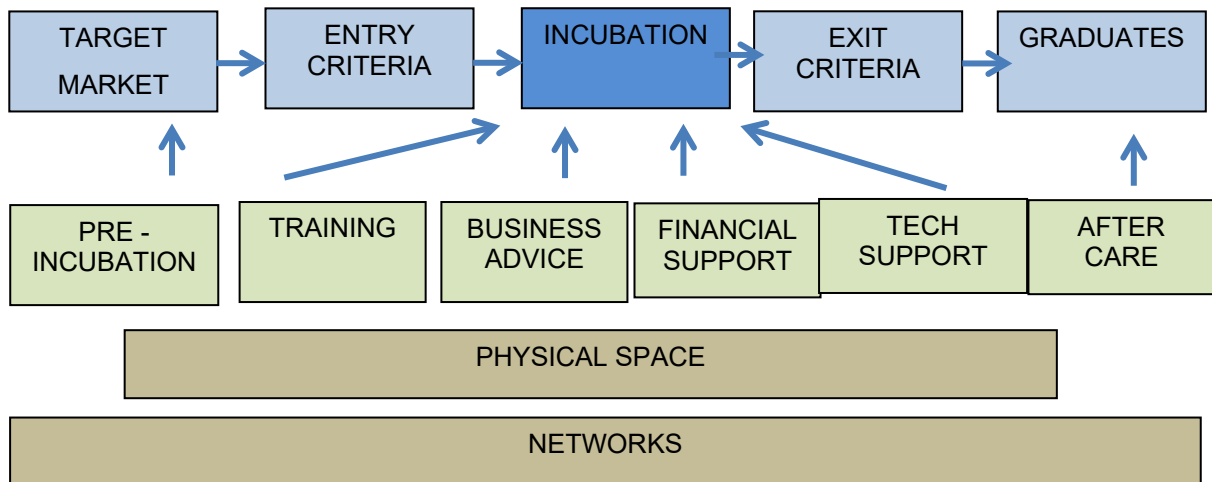
#### 3.1 Incubators

Incubators have evolved over time and meant different things to different stakeholders. It was initially established to promote and develop high level innovation and therefore efforts were concentrated on science, engineering and information technology development. The Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services in a report to the European Commission's Enterprise Directorate General (2002:9), defines an incubator as "an organisation that accelerates and systematises the process of creating successful enterprises by providing them with a comprehensive and integrated range of support, including: Incubator space, business support services, clustering and networking opportunities".

Entrepreneurship support centres have evolved over the years with many types of support centres arising to accommodate different needs. International Business Innovation Association (INBIA): <https://inbia.org/> based in the USA has identified and defined the following types of support centres.

Incubators	Charge monthly program or membership fees or dues for office/desk space and access to program offerings such as mentoring, education/training, and informal learning opportunities. They host events to provide networking and learning opportunities for member companies and the local community.  Member companies must apply and meet the incubator's criteria e.g. industry, stage of development, demographics, etc. Normally a graduation policies is in place based on achievement criteria and residence is for 1-3 years
Co-working spaces	Open, collaborative, community-based workspace for like-minded individuals or early-stage companies. Flexible workspaces in the form of hot desks, private (dedicated) desks or offices. Member businesses pay for their space through rent or membership dues. Co-working spaces typically do not offer formal programs, although they may have speakers, meetups or other optional, informal learning opportunities. Members are encouraged to stay or retained as a sustainable revenue stream.
Economic Development Center or Organization	Responsible for creating, managing and supervising programs and activities that promote, assist and enhance economic development. The focus being on economic development efforts on the creation of jobs and new investment in a region.
Higher Education Academic Department	Housed in institutions of higher education and may provide space for student entrepreneurs while offering courses and curricula focused on entrepreneurship. Attendance in courses is mandatory for students to pass/graduate, and some as well as offering events for networking, pitching, or demonstrating products.
Makerspace	Non-program-based community workspaces providing equipment for specific sectors of manufacturing (e.g., technology, 3D printing, woodworking, food) as well as tools, training and specialized equipment necessary for creating and building physical products.
Pre-Accelerator	Do not have equity-based funding, however, they may have grant funds available or access to a community-based evergreen fund. Pre-accelerators have a competitive application process, have mandatory attendance and include a culminating event at the end of the program.
SBDC	Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) are cooperative service-based centers that are subsidized. SBDCs provide learning opportunities and mentoring for small businesses in any industry. There may be a fee to participate in SBDC training/educational programs. Some centers may have space available for rent, although most are walk-in counseling or training center configurations. The goal of a SBDC is to support small business growth and foster local and regional economic development
Seed Accelerator	Highly competitive application process, and will invest equity capital in selected companies. Short-term, ranging from 3-6 months. provide learning opportunities and intense mentoring to each company, with a culminating graduation /pitching event to present concept or product in front of investors and other key stakeholders. Space can be provided for the duration of the program, or can run virtually with attendance at educational or networking events.
Student Entrepreneurship Center	Programs offered by institutions of higher education (e.g., universities, colleges) and provide entrepreneurship learning opportunities and mentoring to foster entrepreneurship development among students. Some centers offer space while others do not. Participation is open to students enrolled in the institution and could have a competitive application processes.
Super Hub	Blend of several models of entrepreneurial growth listed into a single location, supporting entrepreneurs with a wide range of critical services. It is often the anchor hubs for urban innovation districts
Technology Transfer or Commercialization Office	Technology transfer and commercialization offices are focused on providing information, guidelines and resources to faculty, students or staff interested in commercializing research or intellectual property developed at the university through spin-out or technology startup companies.

In a World Bank initiative known as, Information for Development Programme (Infodev: 2010) a policy document describes a business incubator as ‘focussing a range of services on clients that are designed to help them launch a well - managed business’. In this policy document it illustrates in figure 2 a very simple model for business incubators.



(Infodev, 2010)

**Figure 2: Simple business incubator model**

In general therefore business incubators were established in identified sectors to provide support to SMMEs that would accelerate their success as sustainable businesses. The support could range from taking up residence in the incubator premises to providing business and technical support services and network opportunities to SMMEs outside of the incubator premises. Incubation is a fairly costly SMME development instrument especially if it accommodates residents. The focus is therefore concentrated on SMME development where the probability for success is highest which should also be an important lesson for any newly established incubator.

The Department of Trade and Industry, South African (2014) describes Business incubators as “physical and/or virtual facilities that support the development of early-stage SMEs through a combination of business development services, funding and access to the physical space necessary to conduct business”. They further define incubators as (1) supporting SMEs in the early stages of growth; (2) incubators offer services aimed at strengthening the capacity of SMEs to operate on their own; and (3) incubation is temporary therefore provide services to meet certain needs so that SMEs can grow independently once incubation ends. Importantly “early stage” is not a measure of time, but of how much a business has developed. Incubators, focus on entrepreneurs who wants to grow their businesses, not merely survive.

**3.2 International Fashion Incubators**

As described earlier, incubators play different roles in different environments and mean different things to different organisations. The emphasis in all the international examples found was on business support and networking. Incubators could be separated into two broad groups viz. residence based incubators or non-residence incubators. Another category of incubators also emerged post COVID and due to cost constraints which could be categorised as virtual incubators viz. providing on line advice and platforms.

Information was extracted from the fashion Incubator websites listed in table 1 below and courtesy email was sent to all the incubators (for further study) to verify data available on the websites. The author acknowledges responses from the following incubators viz. the DC Fashion Incubator in the USA, Philadelphia Fashion incubator and Textile Clothing and Footwear Resource Centre of Western Australia

**Table 1: Fashion incubator**

FASHION INCUBATOR/ ACCELERATOR	COUNTRY	URL
Amsterdam Science Park (interdisciplinary)	Netherlands	<a href="https://ace-incubator.nl/">https://ace-incubator.nl/</a>
Boston Fashion Incubator	USA	<a href="https://www.madeincboston.com/">https://www.madeincboston.com/</a>
Brooklyn Fashion Incubator	USA	<a href="https://www.thebrooklynfashionincubator.org/">https://www.thebrooklynfashionincubator.org/</a>
Camera Moda Fashion Lab	ITALY	<a href="https://www.cameramoda.it/en/milano-moda-donna/fashion-hub-market/designer/">https://www.cameramoda.it/en/milano-moda-donna/fashion-hub-market/designer/</a>

FASHION INCUBATOR/ ACCELERATOR	COUNTRY	URL
Centre for Fashion Enterprise/UAL: London College of Fashion	UK	<a href="https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion/business-and-innovation/centre-for-fashion-enterprise">https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion/business-and-innovation/centre-for-fashion-enterprise</a>
Chicago Fashion incubator	USA	<a href="https://www.chicagofashionincubator.org/">https://www.chicagofashionincubator.org/</a>
Council of Fashion Designers of America	USA	<a href="https://cfda.com/programs/designers#!">https://cfda.com/programs/designers#!</a>
DC Fashion Incubator	USA	<a href="https://www.dcfashionfoundation.org/dcff-incubator/">https://www.dcfashionfoundation.org/dcff-incubator/</a>
European Fashion Accelerator	EU	<a href="https://www.eu-fa.eu/">https://www.eu-fa.eu/</a>
Fashion for Good (platform /connector)	Netherlands	<a href="https://fashionforgood.com/">https://fashionforgood.com/</a>
Fashion Tech Farm	Netherlands	<a href="https://fashiontechfarm.com/">https://fashiontechfarm.com/</a>
Fashionomics Africa (platform)	Africa	<a href="https://fashionomicsafrica.org/">https://fashionomicsafrica.org/</a>
Foundry Lab Paris	France	<a href="https://www.foundryflab.com/">https://www.foundryflab.com/</a>
La Caserne Paris	France	<a href="https://www.lacaserneparis.com/">https://www.lacaserneparis.com/</a>
Maisons de Mode	France	<a href="https://www.maisonsdemode.com/">https://www.maisonsdemode.com/</a>
Philadelphia Fashion Incubator	USA	<a href="https://philadelphiafashionincubator.com/">https://philadelphiafashionincubator.com/</a>
SA Creative Industries Incubator (interdisciplinary)		<a href="https://sa-creative-industries-incubator.co.za/">https://sa-creative-industries-incubator.co.za/</a>
San Francisco Fashion Incubator	USA	<a href="https://fashionincubatorsf.org/">https://fashionincubatorsf.org/</a>
Textile Clothing and Footwear Resource Centre of Western Australia	Australia	<a href="https://tcfaustralia.com/">https://tcfaustralia.com/</a>
Toronto Fashion Incubator	Canada	<a href="https://fashionincubator.com/">https://fashionincubator.com/</a>

The services provided by the fashion incubators listed covers the following general support, some to a greater or lesser degree. This is a general compilation of the information and not specific to a particular incubator.

For residential and non-residential incubators:

General and business seminars : Seminars/workshops in range of areas i.e. business plan writing, basic accounting, finance, product costing, pricing, branding marketing, social media marketing, retail management, range presentations/ visual merchandising, cash-flow strategic programs, production and manufacturing, Importing/Exporting, human resources, etc.

Technical Workshops: Courses range from sewing, design, pattern making, product development, draping, styling and textiles.

Marketing: Showcase, Fashion shows, pop up boutiques (temporary retail space, normally in warehouse type environments), Media exposure

Other: Negotiated discounts, fashion trend websites, shipping costs, Networking opportunities, fabric suppliers, between designers, funding support, Advocacy, Mentorship, consultation

### 3.3 Residential Incubators

This is where the fashion designer physically takes up residence on the premises of the incubator as compared to just making use of the services of the incubator.

As listed for non-residence

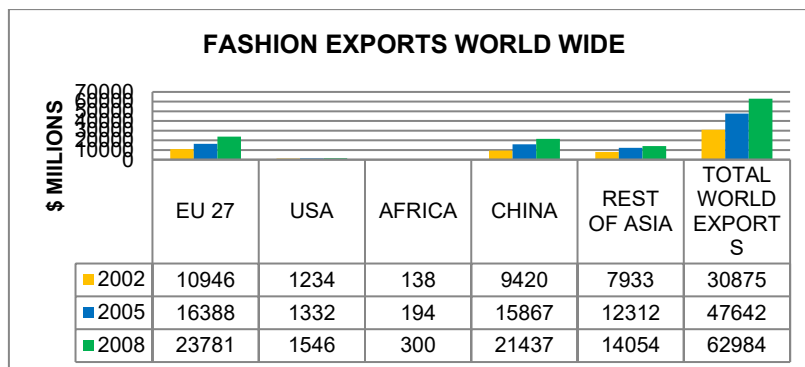
- Residence for a limited period (normally 1 year) on application, phased approach
- Shared administration, office space and show rooms
- Subsidised rental
- Strict criteria with emphasis on potential for success.

- Some have build-in partnership with retail outlets.

Fees charged

Courses fees range from free to between \$500 and \$1500 for technical courses. Membership fees ranges from \$150 to \$250 per month for non-residence and \$ 275 to \$ 550 for residence. Cost would be lesser for shared work space increasing substantially for a private studio. South Africa and particular Africa is lagging behind in fashion exports. The data extracted from the 2010 Creative Economy report illustrates (table 2) this point clearly (UNCTAD, 2010). It is important to note that Europe still commands a significant share of exports even though its manufacturing base has been eroded. This illustrates that Europe’s strength is in fashion brand and design as opposed to manufacturing.

**Table 2: Fashion exports worldwide (UNCTAD, 2010)**



**3.4 South African Incubation Support**

An agency of the Department of Small Business DSBviz. the Small Enterprise Development Agency (Small Enterprise Development Agency, n.d.) through its Technology Programmes supports incubators. The SEDA Technology Programme has 24 incubators across the country based on 3 different models of technology business centres (SEDA, 2012) i.e.

- Technology Demonstration Centres (TDCs) for demonstration of value adding technology,
- Technology Incubators (TIS), sheltered environment for technology based start-ups.
- Hybrid Centres combination of the two. These centres cover a wide range of sectors viz. ICT, manufacturing, biotechnology, small scale mining, construction, bio-fuels, Chemicals Floriculture Automotive, Agriculture, Essential Oils, Aluminium Stainless Steel and Furniture. However no known incubator supports the fashion sector in South Africa.

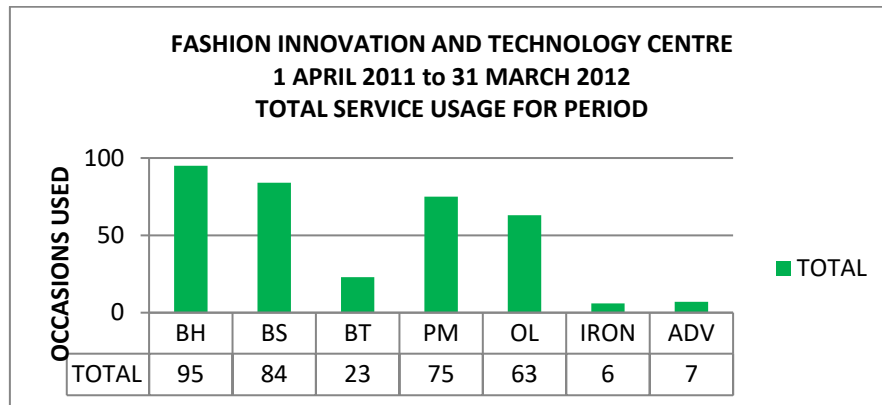
**3.5 Support For The Smme Fashion Sector In Cape Town**

The Technology Station:Clothing and Textiles( TSCT), based at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, to provide technology support to the clothing and textile sector especially SMMEs as part of its community engagement programme. The unit is supported by the Technology Innovation Agency TIA to assist SMMEs to prototype their innovations. The TSCT partnered with the Cape Town Fashion Council and set up a satellite Station on the Cape Town Fashion Council premises known as the Fashion Technology and Innovation Centre (FTIC). The pilot project provided 3 specialised machines and 2 basic machine viz. a plain machine and an overlocker as well as an iron supported by a full time technician.

The following data (tables 3, 4 and 5) was extracted from the Annual report of the TSCT recorded on a quarterly basis for a period of one year, viz. 1 April 2011 to the 30 March 2012 (Isaacs, 2012).

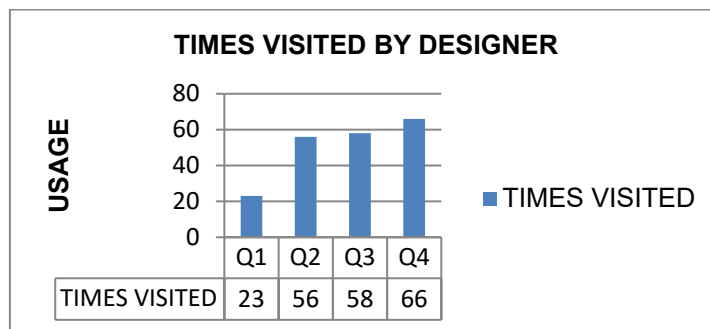
To be able to analyse the data in graphs the various machines and services were first coded (table 3).

**Table 3: The most popular machines and services used for the period.**



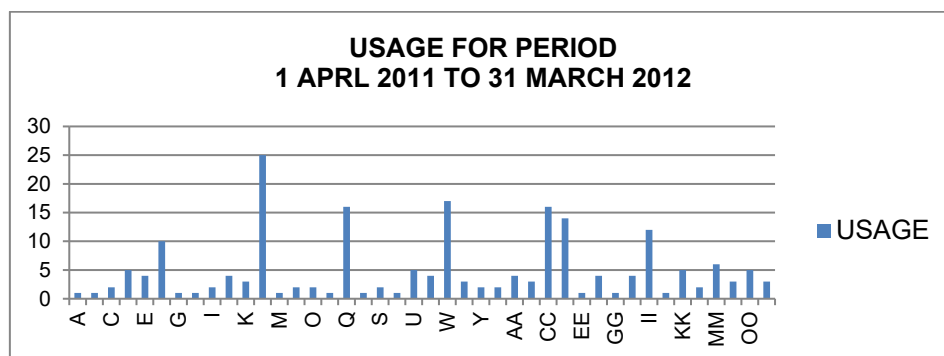
In a period of one year the growth in usage has been steadily increasing (table 6) from 23 users in the first quarter to 66 users in the fourth quarter. It is noted in table 5 that a number of designers are repeat users of the facility. This information would be used to develop the model for an incubator.

**Table 4: The number of times visited by designers**



In table 6 below it shows in coded form the frequency of the 42 designers who visited the FTIC during the period measured. Each letter represents a designer and how often they made use of the services. There are designers vi. L, Q, W, CC, DD that are candidates for a more permanent arrangement as noted in the international fashion incubators residential programme.

**Table 5: The frequency of use by various designers**



The data collected for the period measured show a linear growth in usage of the services of the FTIC as designers become familiar with the support offered. The designers that use the service work at their own premises and use the FTIC for completing their products. Various designers especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds have informally indicated a need for residence space to help them grow their business.

**3.6 A Fashion Incubator Scenario for Cape Town**

A centre would be available to fashion entrepreneurs against a set criteria viz.

- Graduate of an accredited tertiary education institution in Fashion, Clothing or Textiles.
- Registered business with a Business plan
- Payment of subsidised service fee.

#### STAGE 1

- Access to specialised technology to complete prototypes i.e.
- Various specialised sewing machines
- Sample embroidery machine and design facility
- Linkages to subcontractors also known as CMT(Cut Make and Trim) factories
- Technical advise

#### STAGE 2

- Provide up to date information on future fashion trends through access to trend reports magazines journals web information.
- CAD facilities
- CAD pattern making and grading
- Monthly network meetings
- Mentoring for presentation to buyers
- Show rooms
- Business and accounting support.
- Promote sustainable design

#### LONG TERM OBJECTIVES

- Sustainable centre through membership fees and sponsors.
- Organise group tour packages for young designers to attend international shows/exhibitions (access to DTI&CEExport funds)
- Develop the South African fashion tourist market
- Retail outlets at strategic venues (e.g. Waterfront)
- Link to trade house for export
- Exhibition/ Fashion show
- Sustainable Fashion awards

## 4. Conclusion

The proposed fashion incubator in Cape Town aims to rejuvenate South Africa's clothing industry, addressing challenges from low-cost imports and a historical lack of design focus. Drawing on successful international models, this incubator would support emerging designers, helping them navigate industry complexities, boost creativity, and build sustainable businesses. Fashion incubators are proven to foster entrepreneurship and innovation, offering access to specialized equipment, technical advice, and industry networks. This support helps designers transition from purely creative roles to entrepreneurial ones, essential for developing a competitive fashion sector. Successful examples like the Fashion Incubator San Francisco and the British Fashion Council's Designer Fashion Fund highlight the positive impact on job creation and economic growth.

The Cape Town Fashion Incubator would provide similar support, including technical assistance, business mentorship, and networking opportunities. It would cater to the needs of fashion SMMEs, offering access to specialized sewing machines, CAD facilities, and current fashion trends. By supporting designers from disadvantaged backgrounds with subsidized services, the incubator aims to democratize industry resources, fostering a more inclusive and diverse fashion industry in South Africa.

Moreover, the incubator would promote sustainable practices, encouraging the use of eco-friendly materials and processes. This aligns with global sustainability trends and positions South African designers as leaders in ethical fashion. Long-term goals include organizing international tours, developing the fashion tourist market, and establishing retail outlets to integrate South African fashion into the global market. In summary, establishing a fashion incubator in Cape Town offers a strategic opportunity to rejuvenate the South African clothing sector. By addressing both the creative and business needs of emerging designers, the incubator would foster a new generation of fashion entrepreneurs, supporting economic development, job creation, and promoting sustainable and inclusive growth within the industry.

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