



## **Redesigning Manufacturing- Rebalancing the UK Economy through Making | Case Studies**

By **Beverley Nielsen**, Corporate Affairs Director, Birmingham City University

### **Monique Lee (Hat designer at Monique Lee Millinery)**

Monique is taking a PhD in Art and Design at Birmingham City University which she started in 2010, specialising in Fashion, supervised by Professor Colin Gale. She teaches on the MA Fashion Design and Promotion courses and BA Textile Retail Management which have a very practical focus. Having taken her MA at London College of Fashion specialising in Fashion Design and Technology, later worked for several fashion brands and government research organisations in Taiwan and China, before moving to Birmingham where she has been living since 2010.

Whilst she didn't always know that she wanted to start a business, she has always been very practical. She started her hat business to relieve the stresses of studying for her PhD – as she was able to do this at home where she has a small studio and which she could make this happen herself. She focussed on hat design, as this was a more specialised area of the fashion market where, she judged, she would not have so much competition compare with women's wear market.

She started her business one and a half years ago. She met her husband, Nicholas Hylands-White, whilst he was also studying for a PhD at BCU in pain management whilst setting up his own business called Midlands Pain Management, <http://www.takecontrolofpain.com/>, focussing on providing a private pain management service.

Her first sale happened quite quickly after setting up her business. "I didn't know how to deal with private clients at that stage, but I learnt quite quickly. Now I have a proper contract as I have to protect myself whilst providing a great service for clients. I now get paid in stages – design idea, time spent on developing the concept, material purchase, and these stage payments are made even if they don't go forward to actually buy a hat. I have around 5-10 clients who have all bought hats so far and with the average cost of a hat between £350-550. But so far I have not really been earning enough to cover my own fees, just my expenses.

My hats were being used a lot for magazine editorial photo-shoots and I developed my original agreement to protect the hats in these situations. The stylists take the hats and through this agreement they are aware that if they damage them they have to pay a fee for the repair. Now I ask them to promise to feature my brand three times, at least on social media when they use the hats and to send me a few images of behind the scenes at the shoots which I can use on my social media. If I don't ask for these things, I get nothing. I was chosen by VOUGE Italia Senior Fashion Editor Sara Maino to be one of the 10 finalists in MUUSE X VOGUE Young Vision Accessories Designer competition and won the People's Choice Award. Over the past year I have been featured in over 50 articles along with great

hat designers such as Philip Treacy and Stephen Jones, including VOGUE Italia, The Hat Magazine, Royal Ascot Official, Hat Academy, Birmingham Mail, The Guardian, The Independent, Sunday Mercury, Racing Fashion Australia..., as well as in social media and blogs (these can be viewed on [www.moniqueleemillinery.com](http://www.moniqueleemillinery.com)). My hats were also invited to be exhibited at many exhibitions such as London Hat Week, the wonderful Birmingham Made Me, MAC Birmingham, Candid Arts Trust, The Animal Ball by Elephant Family, Selfridges Oxford street personal shopping department, Sotheby's London gallery, Copenhagen Fashion Week...and have been gaining quite a bit of brand profile, which is of course very helpful.

It would have been easier if I were working out of London, where all the stylists and photographers are based, but I can post my hats to them. Being here in Birmingham has given me the advantage of being covered a great deal more in the press as I am unusual as a hat designer based here. Nick has found this too with his business – the media here is always interested in emerging entrepreneurs. I did do a course aimed at helping graduates to gain more business skills, called BSEEN. It was quite good for some insights into accounts and legal issues, and I am very grateful with the funding support from the European Union helped with my business expenses.

Asian countries see things made in Europe as being better and I think Europe will be enjoying a manufacturing revival shortly. I am working on a collection for 4-12 year olds for a Chinese brand which wants to work with a British-based designer – the buyer sees everything made and designer here as a strong selling point. The Chinese love the craftsmanship story, the heritage and authenticity of what is produced here in Britain in particular. I am hoping to launch a collection of 30 styles covering between 1k-2k pieces within the next 6 months. This order could be worth in the region of £30k to me and would be paid in three stages £10k upfront, £10k on ordering materials, and final stage following delivery.

Birmingham could become a vibrant Fashion Design Centre. We have the all the talent emerging from the Faculty of Art, Design and Media at Birmingham City University and other universities in the region, with some great courses in Fashion, textiles and fashion retail. We need to help them develop the commercial skills and if we can provide them with space and links into experienced business mentors and entrepreneurs, then that would really accelerate this process. Taking part as an exhibitor in Birmingham Made Me in 2013 gave my brand and hats the visibility and exposure helping me to gain new clients for Royal Ascot and exposure in the media.

I am also looking to set up a platform to promote young talented fashion professionals – of which there are so many here – into the Chinese market. The new platform which I am setting up is called X Terrace Fashion (an app and a website are being developed but it's on twitter already @xterrace). I have been working with so many people who are very talented and all of them are either not getting paid or not getting paid enough. I am setting up this platform to promote them into the Chinese and later to other Asian countries. There are lots of opportunities but people don't speak the languages, understand the culture or know how to do business over there. I have a possible investor/ friend has also introduced a partner <http://www.cfw.cn/> who has huge fashion company client base in China. If this investment is agreed, we will be working together as partners to launch the platform.

I would like to keep an office in Birmingham and travel to London rather than moving there where it would be very expensive. I have hired one student from the MA Fashion course who is helping part-time during the week as there is so much happening now that I am unable to handle it all myself.

"It was helpful to be able to attend BSEEN, a course on entrepreneurship that is open to graduates and undergraduates. It was quite good for some insights into accounts and legal issues, and I am very grateful for funding support from the European Union, helping with my business expenses. But it could have been even more helpful if the mentor had had greater relevant experience to provide advice on around the things to watch out for and tips on how best to avoid them."

#### Contact and Social Media Information

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