Learning from Tradition to Teach Tomorrow: Preserving the craft of upholstery through VET and equipping the industry for a circular future

Candace Van Der Krogt

Victorian Skills Authority Fellowship, 2026

International Specialised Skills Institute

Victorian Skills Authority

First Published 2026

Report by Candace Van Der Krogt
Typeset by Danielle Cull
Printed by Elgin Printing

The International Specialised Skills Institute

1/189 Faraday St,
Carlton VIC 3053
info@issinstitute.org.au
+61 03 9347 4583

ISBN: 978-1-923561-08-3

Table of contents

01 Acknowledgements 1

02 Executive Summary 3

03 Fellowship Background 5

04 Fellowship Learnings 9

05 How can these learnings benefit Australia and VET 28

06 Personal and Professional Impact 31

07 Considerations 32

08 Dissemination and Stakeholder Engagement 34

09 Conclusion 37

10 References 39

01 Acknowledgements

The Awarding Bodies

The Fellow sincerely thanks the Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) for providing funding support for the ISS Institute and for this Fellowship.

The ISS Institute plays a pivotal role in creating value and opportunity, encouraging new thinking and early adoption of ideas and practice by investing in individuals. The overarching aim of the ISS Institute is to support the development of a 'Better Skilled Australia'. The Institute does this via the provision of Fellowships that allow Australians to undertake international skills development and applied research that will positively impact Australian industry and the broader community.

The ISS Institute was founded in 1991 by a small group of innovators, including Sir James Gobbo AC, CVO, QC, and former Governor of Victoria, who had a vision of building a community of industry specialists who would lead the up skilling of the Australian workforce.

The Fellowship program builds shared learning, leadership, and innovation across the broad range of industry sectors worked with. Fellows are supported to disseminate learning and ideas, facilitate change and advocate for best practices by sharing their Fellowship learnings with peers, colleagues, government, industry, and community. Since its establishment, ISS Institute has supported over 580 Fellows to undertake skill and knowledge enhancement across a wide range of sectors which has led to positive change, the adoption of best practice approaches and new ways of working in Australia.

The Fellowship programs are led by our partners and designed to achieve the needs and goals desired by the partners. ISS Institute works closely to develop a Fellowship program that meets key industry priorities, thus ensuring that the investment will have a lasting impact.

For further information on ISS Institute Fellows, refer to www.issinstitute.org.au

Governance and Management

Sponsor - the Victorian Skills Authority

The Victorian Skills Authority works in partnership with the International Specialised Skills Institute by funding the VET International Practitioner Fellowships. The Fellowship program focuses on developing opportunities within the VET sector to assist in building an Education State in Victoria that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage. In addition, the program is funded to support the priorities of Skills First, including developing capacity and capability, innovative training practices and increasing teacher quality within the VET sector as well as building industry capability and developing Victoria's current and future workforce.

Fellow's Acknowledgements

The ISSI, Dr. Katrina Jojkity, Kay Schlesinger and the Victorian Skills Authority. This opportunity was something I had never imagined being possible. Thank you for being passionate about skills in Australia and for tirelessly advocating for the Institute and its Fellows. I am so honoured to be one.

To my mentor, Dr. Karen O'Reilly -Briggs, without whom this report would not exist in a coherent sense. My thoughts tend to run all over the place and the monthly sessions with you brought everything back into order. Thank you for your honest advice.

Dr. Henry Pook, from the research department at Holmesglen. Your support and genuine excitement upon hearing my fellowship plans gave me such confidence to go forward. Thank you for helping me to understand research strategies and inspiring me to never stop researching.

Anne-Marie Butt from the VSA. I was so nervous during my fellowship interview but I managed to get through it with your infectious excitement for the research I wanted to undertake. Your encouragement and support for this fellowship program made all the difference to me.

Leigh Hill and Deborah Di Amicis, from Holmesglen Institute. You encouraged and supported me to reach out for the fellowship and it has been truly life changing. Thank you for being such advocates for education and sustainability!

Armand Verdier, Gareth Rees, Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke and Alex Law, the master upholsterers I trained with as part of this fellowship. Their incredible skills were paired with such remarkable humility and a kind and open approach to sharing their knowledge. Thank you all for being so generous with your experiences, knowledge and friendship. You let me observe your expertise, you gave me meals and snacks, picked me up in your cars and gave me lifts to train stations. I was not expecting you to also teach me how to encourage and support others as you did. You are what makes this beautiful craft truly wonderful.

Symeon, Orson and Tuesday. I have always talked too much about upholstery but this year I talked of little else. Thank you for keeping me around.

02
Executive Summary

Upholstery in Australia stands at a critical turning point. Once a flourishing trade, it is now facing an urgent skills shortage, an aging workforce and a diminishing number of training providers. The reduced number of apprentices and technical schools delivering the training for apprentices signal the real risk that vital craft knowledge may soon disappear if decisive action is not taken. At the same time, the industry remains heavily reliant on polyurethane foam, an environmentally burdensome material whose production, degradation and disposal contribute to significant waste, pollution and occupational health concerns.

With these pressing concerns for the trade, I undertook a 2025 International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI) Fellowship to investigate how traditional upholstery skills, sustainable materials and international best practice can inform the future of Australian vocational education and the broader upholstery sector. The fellowship focused on immersive training with four master upholsterers in England; Armand Verdier, Gareth Rees, Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke and Alex Law, each demonstrating a unique mastery of upholstery technique, teaching ability and sustainable design knowledge. Training with these master upholsterers revealed a distinct truth: traditional upholstery skills remain the essential foundation for the future of the craft. Techniques such as building long lasting and comfortable structural support, building up and manipulating natural fibres and hand stitching them into shape, are skills that were perfected long before the advent of foam. These hand skills were taught to all upholsterers entering into the trade and are not relics of the past , but are vitally important for the future. They create upholsterers capable of working with sustainable fibres and of adapting their practice to a circular economy.

Observations at the British School of Upholstered Furniture, the School of Upholstery in Kent and other UK institutions revealed that exceptional student outcomes are the result of training these students in traditional techniques early on in their studies via structured skill-building exercises. Getting the students core knowledge engaged by an understanding of shape and form that working with these natural fibres brings, combined with rigorous expectations and deeply supportive teaching drives these excellent results. The AMUSF program reveals how a carefully sequenced curriculum can elevate learners to international standards of craftsmanship. These insights present significant opportunities for strengthening Australia's Certificate III in Upholstery.

Across the fellowship, sustainability emerged not as a trend but as an imperative. The environmental burden of "fast furniture" built with poor-quality polyurethane foam, carrying through from production to landfill, is no longer tenable at the same scale. Master upholsterers such as Fetherstone-Dilke and Law showed that natural fibres, such as wool, coir, animal hair, flax, and paper can be used to build durable, comfortable, recyclable and repairable upholstery when paired with strong traditional skills. The fellowship

also highlighted opportunities to reinvigorate Australian supply chains, particularly for wool and rubberised coir, materials historically used in furniture with an excellent track record of success and now well-positioned to support a transition to environmentally responsible upholstery.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the fellowship's value lies in the transformation already underway at Holmesglen. Students are instinctively selecting natural fibres, blending materials to replace polyurethane foam and incorporating circular-economy principles into their practice.

This shift reflects not only the power of teaching but also the readiness of the next generation to lead meaningful environmental change. During this fellowship, it became clear that upholstery, when taught to a high level of excellence and with craftsmanship and sustainability at its core, has the power to reduce environmental impacts, vastly improve skilled worker retention, build a better furnishing industry and even transform lives.

As apprentices enter workplaces armed with new knowledge and greater understanding of materials and skill, consumer awareness will grow and with it, demand for sustainable, craft-driven upholstery. Educated makers lead educated consumers.

With intentional investment in education, craft-skills preservation and use of the natural sustainable resources available to us, Australia can not only preserve its upholstery heritage but emerge as a leader in circular-economy craft practice. Upholstery need not remain invisible. With knowledge, collaboration and skilled teaching, it can become a visible, valued and vibrant craft, shaping a more sustainable future.

03
Fellowship Background

“The good chair is a task one is never completely done with”

- Hans Wegner

When this fellowship began, I had the privilege of being inducted alongside a group of remarkable fellows. The room was filled with knowledge, talent and experience from diverse sectors. As we introduced ourselves and shared the focus of our fellowships, I stated that I was an upholstery teacher. One of the fellows immediately asked, “What is upholstery?”

It was a simple question, yet it struck me deeply. I spend most of my days thinking about, working with and teaching upholstery, it had never occurred to me that many people may not actually know what the craft involves. And yet, we begin and end each day surrounded by it. We wake in upholstered beds, drive in cars with upholstered seats, commute on trains and buses with upholstered seating, work in offices on upholstered chairs, operate machinery with upholstered seats, and return home to couches, armchairs and dining chairs. Upholstery quietly supports us through a significant portion of our daily lives, but because it is only noticed when exceptionally comfortable, or exceptionally uncomfortable, it often goes unseen. We rarely consider how it is made, or who makes it.

I teach upholstery at Holmesglen Institute in Melbourne, one of the last remaining technical schools in Australia still delivering upholstery training. I am currently the sole upholstery teacher employed there. This reality reflects a critical moment for the trade. There is a shortage not only of educators, but of skilled upholsterers with the breadth of knowledge needed to enter the teaching profession. Upholstery is officially in a skills shortage, and with the median age of upholsterers now 59 years (Jobs and Skills Atlas 2025), the future of the craft in Australia is at risk if action is not taken soon. As a tradesperson deeply committed to my industry, this concern motivated me to apply for the ISSI Fellowship, to strengthen my traditional skills through international training and to ensure this knowledge can be passed on to my students. I do not want this beautiful trade to disappear in Australia.

With many technical schools having closed their upholstery programs due to staff shortages or declining apprentice numbers, some students now travel vast distances, even flying interstate, to access training. I currently teach around 80 students, ranging from apprentices to small business owners. Some apprentices are fortunate to be placed in workshops where they receive broad training, but many employed by larger furniture companies specialise in a single task or set of tasks, such as frame building or upholstery application. While this production-style model develops efficiency, it limits exposure to the full scope of the trade, particularly sewing and traditional techniques.

This is precisely why the technical school plays such an essential role. It fills the gaps left by highly specialised workplaces, ensuring apprentices graduate as well-rounded upholsterers capable of taking on complete projects and contributing meaningfully to the industry and the future of the craft.

Context and History

The production-style model that dominates many large upholstery workshops today has its origins in the Industrial Revolution. In 1776, Scottish economist Adam Smith published The Wealth of Nations, where he championed the division of labour as a means of increasing efficiency. In his well-known example of pin manufacture, Smith describes how the act of making a single pin can be broken into as many as eighteen operations, each performed by a different worker (Smith 1776). This system undoubtedly improved productivity and profitability, but it also came at a cost. When applied to craft trades such as upholstery, this same division of labour fragments knowledge, limiting the breadth of skills an apprentice can develop and narrowing their engagement with their trade as a whole.

Many Australian upholsterers have been trained within this production-style environment. As a result, they may have had very little exposure to the rich traditional hand skills and natural materials that shaped upholstery for centuries. VET teaching in these cases becomes not simply a supplement to workplace learning, it becomes the critical site where apprentices must encounter the full depth of the craft. Technical education must be of the highest quality if apprentices are to graduate with the skill set needed to contribute to the future of the trade. In turn, this supports greater job satisfaction, improves workforce retention and preserves vital craft knowledge. (Veckie, V.W, Veckie E.A. 2021.)

The risks of narrowing a skilled worker's role were articulated powerfully in Harry Braverman's 1974 work Labour and the Monopoly Capital. Written at a moment when industry was already confronting the consequences of mechanisation and specialisation, Braverman argued that dividing work into ever smaller, repetitive tasks alienates workers from both the making process and their own creative potential (Braverman (1974) 1998). Braverman suggests that when workers are separated from the full creative arc of their labour, the work becomes "mindless, bureaucratised and incapable of engaging human capacity" (Braverman (1974) 1998, p.3). Recent studies suggest that employee retention within skilled trades is maintained by the worker developing autonomy and a deep understanding of the craft, combined with potential for further growth in the trade (Haller, R.K., 2024), (Binder, M. and Blankenberg, A.K. 2022). These observations resonate strongly today, as industries worldwide face combined pressures of AI-driven role restructuring, environmental responsibility and an ageing skills workforce.

According to the five- year study undertaken by the Australian Research Council between 2019-2023, in which upholstery is considered to be a 100% craft trade, Australia's craft skills industry is at great risk in part due to "..the generational loss of often highly embodied crafts and hands-on making expertise. This loss of practical making skills and knowledge of materials and their capacities is compounded by the closure of many key trades courses focussed on craft and manual skills, and the winding back of expensive studio training by schools and universities. This deficit not only impacts current industries, but also threatens future innovation and the growth of high-end manufacturing at a time of profound opportunity enabled by advances in digital making technologies." The report also stated "If Australia is to (re) build its domestic manufacturing capacity following over four decades of operations closing and/or offshoring, craft skills embedded and working in collaboration with industry—small and large – are essential to both innovation and capacity development" (Luckman, S., Tower, A. 2023, pp. 6-7).

Industry needs workers to be at their greatest creative potential and completely engaged with their trade at this time in history, to work together creatively to form solutions and implement new methodologies to transition to a circular economy.

Braverman himself was a committed anti-capitalist. However, in countries around the world, traditional crafts have continued to thrive within capitalist systems. They do so because governments, educators, craftspeople and consumers collectively recognise their value. Where craft is protected, taught at high levels and appreciated by an informed public willing to pay a fair price for skilled labour, artisan trades not only survive, they flourish. Upholstery in Australia stands at such a crossroads. By restoring depth to training, reconnecting apprentices with hand skills and elevating the cultural value of the craft, we can ensure that this industry remains vital, sustainable and authentic, and in turn these skills can help to shape our country's future.

History

Upholstery is a skilled craft with a rich history. The first formal upholstery guild was established in 1626, marking an official recognition of a profession grounded in precision, patience and a deep understanding of materials and the comfort they can bring. Remarkably, from the seventeenth century onward, the fundamental principles of upholstery remained largely unchanged. Techniques developed in that century, layering natural fibres, hand stitching and shaping comfort through skill, continued to define the craft for generations.

Only a handful of major technological shifts have truly reshaped upholstery and the way it is made. One of these occurred at the end of the Georgian era and into the Industrial Revolution, when steel coil springs were introduced, revolutionising comfort and changing the structural possibilities of furniture. But perhaps the most transformative change came in 1929, when E. A Murphy, a British scientist working for the Dunlop Rubber Company, invented latex foam. Until that moment, padding was created through carefully built up layers of natural or recycled fibres, meticulously shaped and stitched by the upholsterer's hand. These materials were inherently sustainable and/or biodegradable, often by-products of other industries and easily repurposed when the furniture was reupholstered.

Latex foam, made from the sap of the rubber tree, offered a new convenience. Although more expensive, its ease of use and comfort made it appealing to manufacturers. When produced without synthetic fillers, latex remains biodegradable and will completely degrade, returning nutrients to the soil within 1-2 years; yet it lacked the longevity of hand stitched traditional fillings (Rosslim et al. 2012). In the years that followed World War II and the boom in the production of furniture, Latex foam was frequently used, often used as a top layer over natural fibres. Soon after, the industry encountered a new material that would fundamentally alter upholstery practice: Polyurethane foam.

Polyurethane foam was invented in 1937 by Dr. Otto Bayer and began to be developed as an upholstery material in the 1950s. In its earliest years, polyurethane, then classified under the broad category of "plastic foams", was expensive, chemically unstable and inconsistent in quality. As I.M. Sayed, on behalf of the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation observed, plastic foams before the 1970s were still in their "infancy", plagued by high costs and variable performance. Then came rapid breakthroughs in both chemistry and manufacturing. Suddenly, polyurethane foam could be produced quickly, cheaply and at an industrial scale. "In a very short lapse of time the so-called artificial foams have but completely superseded the use of natural rubber foams in the furniture trade" (Sayed 1984, p.1). The consequences of this shift reverberate today.

Polyurethane foam is petroleum-based and non-biodegradable. While a portion of unused offcuts may be chipped and reconstituted, once foam begins to degrade structurally it cannot be recycled, driving industry research into recycling alternatives (Peng, et al. 2022). Its average functional lifespan is estimated at around twenty years, but estimates for its degradation in landfill range from at least 100 to 500 years. During this process, as polyurethane foam degrades slowly in landfill, it releases micro plastics and leaches hazardous chemicals into the soil and waterways, (Jonidi Jafari, et al. 2025). In inexpensive mass-produced furniture, the quality of

the polyurethane foam is often so poor that foam begins to degrade in as little as twelve months. This phenomenon of “fast furniture” mirrors the rise of “fast fashion”: short-lived products created with very little care and intention that are carelessly disposed of as carelessly as they are acquired, and disproportionately burden waste streams and landfills.

Compounding this challenge are the environmental and health impacts associated with polyurethane foam production and use. Manufacturing emits large quantities of greenhouse gasses and new foam can release volatile organic compounds (VOC’s) into homes and workplaces through off-gassing. (Alford et al. 2021). These emissions are significant enough that the Australian National Construction Code introduced lower VOC thresholds for furnishings in 2025. Polyurethane foam is also highly flammable; in countries with strict fire-safety regulations, such as the United Kingdom, it is commonly treated with chemical fire retardants, many of which are carcinogenic and render both the foam and the furniture containing it unrecyclable.

Together, these issues have catalysed a critical realisation worldwide: the materials and methods driving modern upholstery are environmentally unsustainable. As poor-quality foam filled furniture burdens landfills, releases hazardous chemicals and shortens product lifespans, the industry is confronted with an urgent question;

How can upholstery return to practices that respect both craft and the planet?

This report argues that the answer lies not in nostalgia, but in reclaiming the knowledge of traditional upholstery, pairing hand skills with innovative approaches to natural materials and reducing reliance on polyurethane foam. With this approach, the future of the craft can be rebuilt.

Objectives

The focus of this fellowship was shaped by two critical and deeply interconnected gaps within the Australian upholstery industry. First, upholsterers urgently require access to traditional upholstery training in order to develop a well-rounded understanding of their craft. These foundational hand skills, particularly those involving the shaping, stitching and thoughtful application of fibres, form the bedrock of professional excellence. Without them, the heritage and skill of the craft risk being lost.

Secondly, a deeper understanding of natural and recycled fibres and of emerging alternatives to polyurethane foam was needed for enabling upholsterers to innovate confidently with sustainable materials. Training upholsterers in alternative fillings and methods of application is essential. The majority of exploration in this area is undertaken by designers or others not currently working in the trade. As upholsterers have a greater understanding of what is required from a material in a practical sense, could not their contribution to an alternative to polyurethane foam be invaluable? Improved knowledge in these areas will empower upholsterers to innovate confidently with sustainable materials and rethink upholstery from the inside out. It is only through this dual competence in heritage skills and sustainable materials that the industry can meaningfully reduce its environmental impact and participate in building a circular economy.

In response to these identified gaps, I sought the ISSI Fellowship as an opportunity to undertake targeted professional development in England, to strengthen and enrich the delivery of upholstery training at Holmesglen Institute. By expanding my technical knowledge, the fellowship aimed to improve the traditional upholstery units delivered to students and ensure that this knowledge continues to be passed on with authenticity and precision.

Additionally, the fellowship enabled in-depth investigation into sustainable alternatives to polyurethane foam, including hands on exploration of current best practice, innovative materials and international approaches to circular upholstery. Together, these experiences provide both the historical foundation and the contemporary insight required to guide the Australian upholstery industry toward a more skilled, sustainable and resilient future.

04
Fellowship Learnings

Armand Verdier

Figure 1. Armand Verdier in his workshop.

In Cheddington, a quiet, picturesque village in Buckinghamshire, works one of todays most gifted traditional upholsterers: Armand Verdier. Verdier began his upholstery journey in 1998 in Normandy, France, before training at the prestigious École Boulle in Paris, an institution renowned for nurturing some of the finest artisans in Europe.

His career has been shaped by mentorship under extraordinary contemporary craftspeople, including David James and Angela Burgin, and from the outset he has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to passing on the craft through rigorous traditional training. Verdier's workshop, filled with natural light and an atmosphere of calm mastery, became my first site of immersive learning.

The training commenced with a five-day course centred on the Tabouret carré, or square stool in English, a foundational French upholstery object. In France, every first year student must master this square stool, refining it over the course of the year before sitting upon it as they continue their upholstery training. This tradition reflects something essential about French craftsmanship; a reverence for process, discipline and the deep knowledge gained through repetition.

The course drew together a diverse group of learners; a fellow upholstery teacher looking to improve training for their students, a talented small business owner seeking skill refinement, a community arts worker who upholsters as a creative practice, and a skilled hobbyist aspiring to open an upholstery business. Despite their varied backgrounds, all were united by a love of upholstery and a shared desire to strengthen their hand skills. From the very first steps, finding the centre points on the frame, chamfering the timber edges, applying jute webbing with precision, I was reminded of the intentionality that underpin

traditional methods. No staples were used, only tacks. Every placement mattered. Attaching coil springs with a straight springing needle, lashing the springs into a cohesive unit and stitching them to hessian feels grounding and purposeful, strong and secure, awakening a sense of craftsmanship that is often diluted in modern production.

Under Verdier's guidance, exercises that once felt procedural now took on greater meaning. The stuffing process that makes up the upholstery padding reveals even more of the craft's intricacy. Teasing coconut fibre or coir, a renewable by-product of the coconut industry, into long knitted chains, securing it under stuffing ties shaping it through careful regulation and setting the hessian scrim with bridle ties, using commonly regarded as unbreakable steel needles (although I managed to break two, apologies made to Monsieur Verdier), all formed a sequence of upholstery rooted in centuries of tradition. The amount of material used was surprising and made forming it into shape profoundly satisfying.

The hand stitching stage further underscored the importance of the earlier stages of work. Precision at each step negated the need for corrective measures later. Using a regulator to adjust the stuffing, the firmness of the corners are hand stitched into place. The absence of blind stitching in the French method was instead replaced by three running stitches to secure the fibres in place. Verdier's explanation for this, "French upholsterers stuff correctly the first time" was said without a hint of arrogance, rather was a reflection of his disciplined practice and reverence for method. These rows of running stitches preceded a careful top stitch, followed by a blanket stitch to the edge and the final addition of a second stuffing of horsehair. A cover of calico secured, the stool took on its finished form, at least in my case, as I was leaving the top cover off to display the beautiful layers. It was a piece capable of lasting a century, and when eventually restored, producing no more than a handful of waste, all of it biodegradable or recyclable.

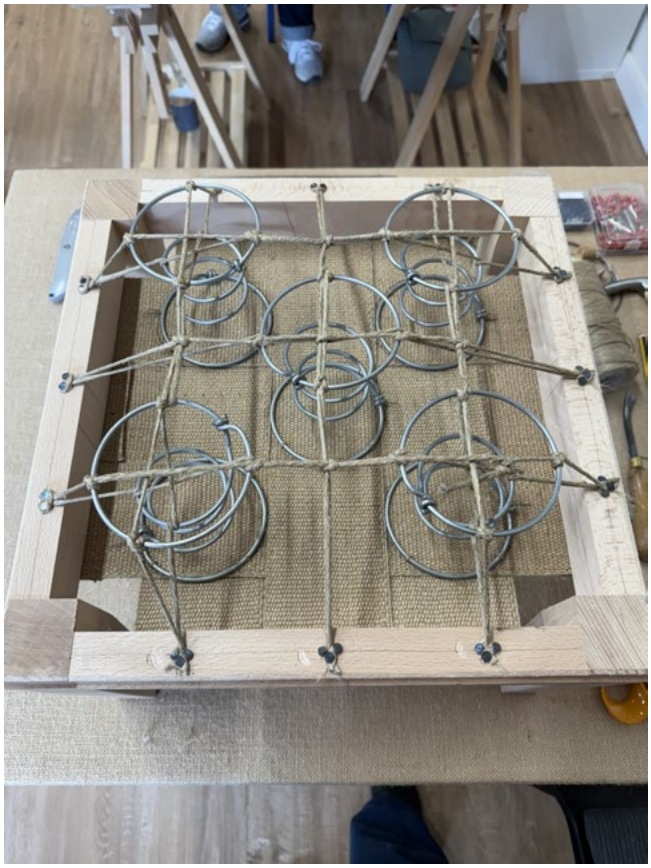


Figure 2. Tabouret carré process – Springs.

Figure 3. Tabouret carré process – Stuffing.

Figure 4. Tabouret carré process – Teasing fibres.

Figure 5. Tabouret carré process – Stitching.

Figure 6. abouret carré process – Finished Example.

Following the stool course, I undertook a second week of intensive one-on-one training. Verdier guided me through an antique dining chair and a hand-stitched horsehair squab, transmitting not only knowledge but the philosophy behind French craftsmanship. Verdier possesses an innate sense of form, an ability to “see” where the next stitch must go. Yet he humbly insists that such refinement is not a gift but a discipline, honed through practice and through the uncompromising standards instilled by his own tutors at L’École Boulle.

Observing Verdier’s commissioned work deepened my understanding of material quality and the importance of maintaining access to traditional supplies, something increasingly challenging for the United Kingdom in a post-Brexit market. These discussions prompted me to reflect on how Australia might make sustainable, traditional materials accessible and viable for both students and upholsterers working in industry.

As our time together drew to a close, Verdier spoke passionately about the future of traditional upholstery. For him, the preservation of antiques and indeed, the preservation of cultural heritage, depends on the continued teaching and practice of these methods. These skills, he argued with quiet conviction, are not optional, they are essential.

Comically loaded with finished pieces, deepened knowledge and strengthened hands, I boarded the train to my next destination, carrying with me the profound influence of Verdier's mastery, generosity with both knowledge and the continued supply of pastries throughout the week, and belief in the craft. The French approach, rooted in precision, repetition and a reverence for process and artistry, had awakened a deep respect for the intentionality embedded in each stage of the craft. As the train moved forward, I felt a rising curiosity: How does this same devotion to excellence play out in other training environments? Verdier revealed the power of craft through method, would the next master upholsterer reveal the power of traditional craft through teaching? The next stop would take me to meet a craftsperson whose teaching influence was already renowned internationally: Gareth Rees.

Figure 7. Boarding the train happily loaded down with furniture.

Gareth Rees

Figure 8. With Gareth Rees in his studio.

Gareth Rees is a remarkable person, a true combination of both master craftsperson and scholar, combining exceptional practical skills with an encyclopaedic command of the historical and theoretical foundations of upholstery. His ability to recall, contextualise and articulate the origins of traditional process positions him as both a custodian and interpreter of craft heritage. Rees brings nearly three decades of professional upholstery experience, spanning a broad range of upholstery disciplines. His career includes the ownership and management of a well-regarded upholstery business, where he undertook historically significant restoration work and high-end commissions. Through mentoring aspiring and journeyman upholsterers within his workshop, he recognised a natural aptitude for teaching, an insight that led him to formally begin teaching at a design studio in London. His capacity to adapt his teaching approach for diverse learners quickly established him as a highly regarded and beloved educator.

Rees's teaching is characterised by a profound understanding of the craft, cultivated through years of hands-on practice and deep engagement with traditional and modern methods. His commitment to advancing upholstery education has seen him take on influential training roles across major guilds and industry bodies in the United Kingdom, while also contributing to professional learning networks throughout Europe and the United States. His work reflects not only technical mastery, but a genuine passion for preserving and transmitting the rich heritage of upholstery to future generations.

Rees currently serves as Director of Training for the Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers (AMUSF), the principal regulatory body overseeing the upholstery training programs followed by most institutions in the United Kingdom. He also contributes his expertise at a national level through his roles on the board of the Guild of Traditional Upholsterers, and as a consultant to the board of the Worshipful Company of Upholders, one of the historic Livery Companies, entrusted with the preservation of craft standards in upholstery.

Rees's exceptional teaching skills and unwavering commitment to the advancement of the trade led him to partner with master upholsterer Gregory Cupitt-Jones, a specialist in traditional and antique restoration, to establish the British School of Upholstered Furniture. The school has become renowned for its consistently outstanding standard of student work.

It was the work emerging from this school that first captured my attention. The calibre of the student pieces, meticulous, refined and executed to an extraordinary standard, was nothing short of breathtaking. The opportunity to learn directly from Rees, whose teaching had clearly been a factor elevating learners to such levels of skill, was profoundly exciting. Observing these outcomes had sparked a strong determination to explore how similar excellence might be fostered within upholstery training in Australia.

The British School of Upholstered Furniture is nestled outside of a beautiful rowing town called Henley-on-Thames in Oxfordshire. Each summer the Henley Royal Regatta is held here. A stroll through the village revealed cobblestone streets hung with bunting, commemorative plaques and nods to its rowing history sprinkled throughout. I arrived at the British School of Upholstered Furniture during the end of year celebration for the 2024/2025 cohort. I was immediately struck by the remarkable standard of work on display. The refinement and precision evident in the student's pieces was truly inspiring, reflecting an impressive depth of skill and attention to detail.

Figure 9. Student piece completed by Debbie Ferguson at the British School of Upholstered Furniture (@debbieferguson_upholstery).

During this visit, I met lead tutors Gareth Rees, Gregory Cupitt-Jones and Charlotte Ellis-Brown, whose generosity, warmth and evident passion for teaching created an atmosphere of genuine celebration as they acknowledged the students achievements. What stood out most, however, was the dynamic between the tutors and their students. The ease and mutual respect displayed

in these interactions made it clear that the school's outstanding results were not the product of rigid, task-driven instruction, but of high expectations paired with deeply supportive and inspiring teaching. The students were not only meeting the tutors exacting standards, they were motivated to exceed them.

I was fortunate enough to experience Rees's teaching methods in his own workshop for dedicated one-on-one training. Rees's workshop is situated within an old schoolhouse that has been thoughtfully repurposed into a hub of artists' studios. A recent open-studios initiative had opened the site to the local community, offering visitors an opportunity to explore the varied creatives practices housed within. As we walked through the interconnected studios, I was struck by the vibrancy of this shared artistic space and the possibilities it created for collaboration.

The training began with an exploration of spring-tying techniques, accompanied by a discussion of the exceptional standards achieved at the British School of Upholstered Furniture and the structure of the AMUSF program. Rees noted that, ideally, smaller class sizes than I was currently used to teaching, would allow for even more individualised instruction. Within the AMUSF diploma, students complete six major pieces across three years, supported by extensive skills-based training exercises, an approach markedly different from the Australian Certificate III in Upholstery. This raised important questions: Could a similar emphasis on structured skill-building improve the quality of student work in Australia? Would limiting the number of completed pieces, in favour of deeper technical practice, enhance learning without diminishing student engagement? The AMUSF model operates outside the apprenticeship system, is not government subsidised and has a significant cost attached, which inevitably shapes access. Classes run one day per week, with separate groups for each year level, and are substantially smaller than the classes currently run at Holmesglen.

Rees provided a frame to practice spring tying, beginning by building the support for the springs with black and white herringbone webbing, a material rarely available in Australia, yet notably stronger than the jute webbing commonly used. Improved access to such materials, I observed, would significantly enhance the longevity and stability of intricate spring work in Australian upholstery. As we worked, Rees drew comparisons between British and Australian methods of spring tying. Whilst acknowledging that the Australian eight-way 'spider' lashing offers strong central stabilisation, he questioned whether the extra work involved provides meaningful benefit over more traditional, four-way tie methods. His explanations were delivered with clarity, patience and a palpable enthusiasm for both craft and teaching. His ability to convey complex technical knowledge without overwhelming the learner, maintaining perfect eye contact to ensure the learner grasped the concept before moving on, exemplified the teaching skills for which he is so widely respected.

Rees spoke about his own research grant, during which he investigated Scandinavian upholstery materials and techniques, spending significant time in a Finnish workshop experimenting with paper webbing, wood shavings and straw. In contrast to British traditions, Scandinavian upholsterers use very little animal hair in their stuffing, relying instead on more intricate springing methods to create comfort and support. This discussion reinforced his belief that every culture should value and preserve its own craft identity. Upholstery traditions, he emphasised, arise from the materials available within each environment and from the knowledge refined over generations.

Under Rees's direction, I observed the striking differences between my own apprenticeship training in Australia and the deeper understanding of these traditional techniques being taught in Britain. An understanding that the stuffing, not the springs, create the final shape, while the springing serves primarily to enhance comfort. This distinction prompted deeper reflection. What constitutes an Australian upholstery heritage? What materials are available locally that could be used by Australian upholsterers? Other cultures have developed their craft using resources available at

hand, seaweed in coastal regions, straw in agrarian areas, paper where lack of access to supplies demanded innovation. I began to question whether local Australian materials have been overlooked in favour of long-imported traditions from Europe and America. This sparked curiosity about how traditional knowledge, contextualised within local landscapes might shape the future of upholstery education and the industry in Australia.

Figure 10. Rees demonstrating spring lashing.

Time with Rees reshaped my understanding of how masterful teaching can elevate a craft. Rees demonstrated that great teaching is cultivated through structured learning, rigorous practice and an environment where support and challenge co-exist. With Rees's lessons on tradition, technique and teaching still resonating, I travelled to Richmond, where another dimension of the craft awaited, one grounded not only in history but in urgent ecological responsibility. It was here that I would learn from Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke, whose work bridges the past and the future through sustainability, material literacy and advocacy for industry-wide change.

Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke

Figure 11. Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke in her studio.

Leaving Henley-on-Thames with a head full of new insights from Rees, I travelled to the leafy expanse of Richmond-upon-Thames, an outer borough of southwest London known for historic Ham House, the roaming deer of Richmond Park and its proximity to the botanical splendour of Kew Gardens. Against this glorious backdrop, I commenced training with the eminent sustainable upholsterer Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke.

Originally trained in the legal profession, working as a lawyer for Warner Bros., Fetherstone-Dilke entered into upholstery later in her career, completing an AMUSF diploma at London Metropolitan University before receiving further instruction under Gareth Rees at the British School of Upholstered Furniture. From the outset, she was drawn to sustainable materials and was confronted by the scale of waste and toxicity associated with modern upholstery fillings. As noted earlier in this report, upholstery materials in the United Kingdom are frequently treated with fire retardant chemicals

to meet stringent regulations, substances that raise health concerns for both upholsterers and consumers (Babrauskas et al. 2011).

It was American Environmental Scientist, Mountaineer and Writer, Dr. Arlene Blum, who discovered the harmful fire-retardant chemicals used in furniture and children's clothes, were leaking into the home environment, and causing multiple health issues (Slater, D. 2012). In 2008 Dr. Blum founded the Green Science Policy Institute to act as a watch dog and a source of accurate scientific data. The institute's mission is to "facilitate safer use of chemicals to protect human and ecological health" (Green Science Policy 2026). These fire retardant chemicals are still being used today.

Motivated by this evidence and equipped with legal acumen, Fetherstone-Dilke has quickly become a persuasive voice for sector-wide change, consulting to major furnishing companies seeking to improve their methods or to assist in the design of a range of sustainable furniture. Fetherstone-Dilke has recently been named by Country and Town House as a future icon, one of the industry leaders helping to make the planet a better place (Cleland, L. 2026). Fetherstone-Dilke's work is affecting the industry globally. While Australian upholsterers are not bound by the same fire regulations, the ambition to work with fewer petrochemical inputs and more natural, sustainable materials is shared, not least because many natural fibres are inherently fire resistant.

In practical sessions, Fetherstone-Dilke argues persuasively that wool-based systems currently offer the most robust pathway among sustainable options. "Wool-based is winning so far" she says. Further to this, she hinted at a wool-based foam alternative prototype she was currently working on, but it was not ready to display at the time of my visit. Fetherstone-Dilke prepared an array of fibres and materials to share the knowledge of what was currently available in the market. She broke down the construction of a prototype chair, made entirely from recyclable or biodegradable materials and recently exhibited at the Future Fabrics Expo, held during London Climate Action Week.

Figure 12. The prototype chair.

Working at the bench, she invited me to handle each fibre, to 'read' the material, testing for resilience, spring, recovery and feel, examining whether these fibres could ultimately replace necessary modern upholstery functions as a natural alternative. The exercise highlighted a core idea of her practice: modern polyurethane foam is an engineered shorthand for properties that traditional fibre systems achieved through skilled layering and stitching. The question then, is not simply whether natural materials can imitate foam, but how a well-trained upholsterer can manipulate natural fibres in a modern way to achieve enduring comfort.

Figure 13. Materials such as coir, hemp, eelgrass, wool and others respond in different ways. An understanding of the material and how to work with it is crucial for the upholsterer.

A key influence on Fetherstone-Dilke's work is McDonough and Braungart's book Cradle to Cradle, particularly the imperative not to mix biological and technical materials in ways that preclude end of life recovery (McDonough & Braungart 2002). In place of 'cradle-to-grave' product thinking, she champions material use that is either biodegradable (e.g. pure wool that will biodegrade safely into the earth within 12 months), or cleanly recyclable (e.g. metal micro springs that can be recycled easily). This system of 'cradle to cradle' production, if implemented, would result in zero waste. Fetherstone-Dilke will stray from this philosophy very occasionally, using some reclaimed fibres that are blended, such as flock made from material waste, due to the enormous burden textile waste places on our planet. This design logic aligns seamlessly with the ethos of traditional upholstery and fibres; repairable constructions, components with long service lives and materials that can be separated, renewed or returned to the earth.

The opening quote in Cradle to Cradle is from Albert Einstein; "The world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation." (McDonough & Braungart 2002, epigraph). Similarly, Fetherstone-Dilke urges the industry to step away from the reflex to create substitutes that merely look like foam. She suggests this is where companies are going wrong when they are trying to produce a polyurethane foam replacement. Many current bio-foams are sold and specified as if they were one-for-one replacements, yet they often fall short on performance, cost or end-of-life credentials. She discussed several contenders on the market currently, such as mycelium-based bio foam (derived from fungi), soy-based foams (such as the foam produced by Vita-Group), foam replacement products made from recycled plastics (such as Enkev's Labyrinth 100, Springbond's Ultraflex) and Agoprene (a Norwegian foam replacement constructed with kelp, mineral fillers derived from seashells and cellulose feedstock from the paper industry). The founder and CEO of Agoprene, Celine Sandberg, was inspired to make an environmentally friendly alternative to polyurethane foam by exploring its petrochemical makeup. Sandberg said in an interview with Wired magazine in 2023, "I learned that petroleum is a product of degraded biomass over time, so you can, in theory, use biomass to replace petroleum", (Chan, D. 2023, para. 3). This thinking and direction drove Sandberg to experiment and create the bio-foam. Fetherstone-Dilke has built a collection of these foam alternatives and her assessment is pragmatic: promising, but not yet ready as comprehensive replacements for polyurethane foam in all cases, particularly where recyclability or biodegradability is compromised by synthetic binders.

Crucially, Fetherstone-Dilke believes the return to hand skills is at the heart of material transition. Without mastery of traditional methods, such as stuffing, shaping and stitching, upholsterers lack the technique to manipulate natural fibres into durable, comfortable forms. As she puts it;

"Without traditional upholstery we won't have the craft skills to know how to transition into a circular economy."

To translate these principles into practice, Fetherstone-Dilke demonstrated fibre-blending using a fibre carding machine, or picker as we call them in Australia. This machine blends or 'knits' together fibres such as coir, wool and hemp. Together we reupholstered a modern Ikea chair, replacing the foam with natural, biodegradable materials and built cushion prototypes using a core of rubberised coconut fibre produced by Enkev. 'Cocolok' (curled coir with natural latex rubber), was used as a structural layer, supplemented by blended natural filler. The resulting cushions were comfortable, easily repeatable and materially cheaper than foam, evidence that sustainability can align with performance and cost when guided by skilled manufacture. For Australia, such an approach raises immediate supply-chain questions. Rubberised coir, once common in local upholstery and automotive applications, has become difficult to source in appropriate grades. Historically, it performed exceptionally in furniture when paired with horsehair, flock and or latex foam; its decline tracks the rise of affordable polyurethane foam rather than any failure of performance. Could going back be a way forward? Fetherstone-Dilke

suggests that it is. Re-establishing supply of quality rubberised coir and re-teaching the techniques of application, could be a pivotal step in a more circular upholstery method for Australia.

Figure 14. Fetherstone-Dilke using the carding machine to blend fibres together.

Fetherstone-Dilke also highlighted contemporary makers, such as Sedalia, Fermoie, Coakley & Cox and Soane, all of which combine paper edge roll, rubberised coir or rubberised horsehair sheets, latex foam and wool wadding to achieve commercial efficiency without abandoning material and environmental integrity. The broader point is cultural: British upholstery has long leveraged local by-products and this history of respect and utilisation of local materials continues to be fostered. An instructive example is the Herdwick wool woven by makers such as Cable & Blake, a fibre once so undervalued that burning a fleece could be cheaper than processing it, despite the animal welfare necessity of shearing. Such examples underscore why wool, breathable, fire-resistant and resilient, features prominently in sustainable upholstery throughout Britain.

Later, I sat in on a meeting between Fetherstone-Dilke and Andrew Kershaw of Michell Wool, Australia's largest wool exporter. Kershaw explained the company hopes to replace polyester wadding materials in furniture and mattress production and that they are already making massive strides in the mattress market. Michell is developing needle-punched wool pads for furniture and bedding and the results are demonstrating high recovery after compression and are capable of being layered with other natural components. Where thermal bonding is used, bio-based binders (e.g. PLA derived from corn) are under trial, albeit with current cost premiums. Kershaw noted price parity for Australian wool in the UK market and argued for its superior quality, highlighting the single scouring process used to prepare the wool, which can lead to reduced fibre entanglement. Kershaw stated sheep are primarily raised for their wool in Australia and the country has superb grazing conditions for the sheep. All the wool is accredited through the Australian Wool Industry, whilst acknowledging that they do not currently offer traceability as it increases cost and that many clients prioritise efficient, affordable materials. As leaders in the area of traceability, a Yorkshire-based natural mattress company called Harrison Spinks are offering traceability to the extent that they are growing their own hemp and raising their own sheep (Harrison Spinks, 2026).

Kershaw's prior experience working in the Polyurethane foam industry brought an additional perspective on worker exposure and process safety, reinforcing the broader rationale for reduced reliance on petrochemical foams. For myself, the conversation catalysed a distinct set of questions: If Australian wool is competitive abroad, how might we better use local wool fibres in our upholstery classrooms and workshops at home? I have already incorporated a premium wool wadding from Victorian company Wool Valley in teaching and practice, to excellent results. However, the current price differential between wool wadding and polyester wadding requires careful client education about the value gained in longevity, comfort, moisture wicking, inherent fire resistance and environmental responsibility. The challenge, and

the opportunity, is to activate local supply chains and educate consumers, scaling demand so that environmentally preferable materials become affordable.

Fetherstone-Dilke crystallised a pathway in which craft skill is the engine of sustainability. By reclaiming traditional methods and rebuilding supply chains for natural materials, upholsterers can deliver comfort and longevity without defaulting to polyurethane foam. The implications for Australian VET are immediate: curriculum that prioritises bench time with fibres, assessment that rewards technical precision, and partnerships that reconnect upholstery schools with local producers. Fetherstone-Dilke revealed that sustainability is far more than a material choice, it is a craft philosophy and one that demands courage, innovation and a return to the very hand skills that polyurethane foam once replaced. Through her, I saw how ethical practice, scientific understanding and traditional craftsmanship could converge into a modern, future-focused upholstery industry.

Yet these insights raised another question: How do contemporary upholsterers honour traditional methods while meeting the demands of a profit-driven world?

The answer lay in Kent, in the calm, thoughtful practice of Alex Law, a master craftsman who embodies a rare integration of traditional skill, environmental ethics and hands on experience. His workshop would become the final site of learning, where I would witness how upholstery can evolve with integrity while remaining rooted in the values that have sustained the craft for centuries.

Alex Law

Figure 15. Alex Law in his classroom.

For the final leg of one-on-one training, I travelled to Faversham, Kent, a historic town of ancient roman roads and artesian wells located near the English coastline, rich in craft heritage and natural beauty. Here, I was to meet Alex Law, a master upholsterer whose reputation had long preceded him. Law's second book, The Upholsterer's Step by Step Handbook, is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive contemporary upholstery texts, valued for its clarity, precision and deep respect for both modern and traditional methods (Law, A., 2015).

Law is one of the last British upholsterers in his generation to complete a traditional upholstery apprenticeship. When he began his training in 1989, the English apprenticeship system was entering a period of rapid decline; by 1994, changes to the apprenticeship system, including the introduction of shorter, modern apprenticeships

by the government for a variety of roles typically not apprenticeship-based, further devalued the system, as Law experienced it. Following his apprenticeship, Law undertook a traditional journeyman path, working across workshops in the United Kingdom and Canada . These years of intensive bench time and exposure to master craftspeople formed the bedrock of his expertise and ultimately shaped him into the master upholsterer he is today. Law began teaching at London Metropolitan University, where he trained many of the United Kingdom's most accomplished upholsterers and caners. He now serves as head tutor and owner of the widely respected School of Upholstery in Kent, the setting for my final period of immersive study.

From the outset, Law's deep commitment to sustainability was evident. He has long experimented with recycled and natural fibres, not as a theoretical exercise but as a practical response to the environmental burden created by modern furniture production. Law participates in community-based coastal clean-ups and has used shoreline waste to upholster what he calls his "beach clean chair" documenting the process to raise awareness of material waste and possibilities for reuse (Law, A. 2017).

Figure 16. Law using the carding machine to blend fibres together.

While he encourages the use of natural fibres, Law also recognises the vast quantities of synthetic waste already circulating through the global materials stream and is interested in finding ways to keep it out of landfill and repurposing it into something useful. He advocates for responsible reuse wherever possible, layering reconstituted chipped foam, rubberised coir and latex foam to create hybrid systems that reduce new material consumption without compromising structural integrity and performance.

Law has trialled many emerging 'eco-foams', including Springbond Ultraflex (derived from recycled plastic bottles), assessing them for performance, durability and sustainability in furniture. Law observes the usefulness of Ultraflex, particularly in the arms and inside backs of furniture. He feels that in its current iteration it is best layered when it comes to hard wearing areas such as seats, as a polyester based material , it tends to crush or fall. Law says big companies are getting on board with these eco foams. John Lewis, a chain of department stores in Britain, are releasing a furniture range made with an eco-foam developed in part, from recycled plastic bottles. He examines a sample of the foam replacement product that an Australian company called Upparel, based in Cranbourne , are producing from textile waste. Although he recognises the current limitations of these foam alternatives, Law believes strongly that supporting these early-stage innovations is essential for driving further research and development.

In a point of friendly contrast to Fetherstone-Dilke, Law argues that during this transition period, the industry still requires materials that behave like foam, if uptake is to occur at scale. As Law articulates it, "We are in a period of transition between polyurethane foam and something else. For manufacturing to adopt it, currently at least, it needs to be a like for like replacement. It needs to look like foam, cut like foam, respond like foam."

Law's relationship with natural fibres is both practical and profoundly philosophical. He is an amateur mycologist and has experimented with making mycelium-based foam, finding it

surprisingly resilient but ultimately lacking the long-term performance needed for sustainable furniture. For Law, true sustainability requires longevity:

"Sustainability is met by a piece of furniture being comfortable for many years."

He has refined the art of blending fibres, even cultivating his own flax for use in upholstery. For Law, traditional upholstery skills are not relics of the past, they are indispensable foundations for the future of responsible, skilled craftsmanship. As he explains, "Traditional methods and materials become the well from which to fish modern process from ." He further adds, "We are looking at furniture from the past and using that as a source material for what we can do in the future with a smattering of new materials and methods." Removing these skills from training, he warns, would sever the profession from its most valuable source of knowledge.

Law exemplifies a genuine approach to sustainability, not only in materials but in lifestyle and community practice. He shares a car, lives in a compact, energy-efficient home, grows vegetables in a community allotment and actively advocates for the protection of local natural environments. These values infuse his teaching, demonstrating that sustainability is not merely a set of practices to utilise merely occasionally, but a way of living thoughtfully and ethically. He is also acutely and empathetically aware of the economic realities of upholstery. Law offers clients three tiers of upholstery – gold (full traditional methods), silver (natural and sustainable materials with coil springs) and bronze (foam and serpentine springs). As he puts it, "The reality is, you are upholstering to people's budget." Because people have been used to being able to buy furniture cheaply, they aren't aware how much work goes into traditional upholstery and they don't realise the value of it. That has certainly influenced the market in Australia. Perhaps the consumer is being cut out of the deal here though. Would they be willing to pay more for natural biodegradable materials, produced by a talented craftsperson who has worked hard to learn their trade, and designed to last a generation? Shouldn't they know that they have a choice at least? Law understands the disparity between the artistry of traditional work and the price people are willing to pay for this work. He suggests we need to be careful that traditional upholstery doesn't become too much of a niche art form that it is cost prohibitive for the clients. Historically, upholsterers used what they had available locally and traditional upholstery skills were handed down to the next generation. The industry needs to regain this functioning craft approach going forward.

While in Kent, Law organised a visit to a local upholstery supplier, a company that has remained one of the most respected in the United Kingdom for over three decades, Martins Upholstery Supplies. The owner, Darren Fillingham, welcomed us with warmth and enthusiasm, and was excited to show the range of supplies they stock. Although the owner is not a trained upholsterer, his dedication to the advancement of the trade is unmistakeable. This commitment is reflected in his deliberate curation of exceptional materials, selected not merely for commercial viability but to support and elevate professional standards within the industry. Fillingham genuinely listens to his clients and makes an effort to stock the materials they need to do a good job. He reflected on the evolution of the stock Martins has supplied over the years, tracing shifts in the industry as upholsterers moved decisively toward polyurethane foam, before gradually reintroducing more traditional materials. In recent years, this has included a renewed emphasis on products such as rubberised coir, signalling a return to time-honoured techniques, material integrity and shifts towards sustainability within contemporary upholstery practice. Martins has stocked the materials needed to supply upholsterers through these transitions, based off direct feedback and prompting from their clients. Fillingham's faith in the upholstery community to know what they require for their craft has been rewarded, Martins decision to stock rubberised coir and other natural materials has been a profitable one and indeed a large portion of the workshop was dedicated to the storage and dispense of these supplies. The ease and friendliness between

Law and Fillingham was to be admired. This was a company that had a genuine respect for their clients and their professional insight. Through this relationship, supplier and craftsperson worked in partnership to uphold the highest standards of quality while embracing innovation and change where it could enhance the craft. This strong community between supplier and craftsperson has played a vital role in fostering meaningful and sustainable progress across the upholstery trade in the United Kingdom.

Figure 17. Visiting Martins Upholstery Supplies.

Figure 18. The rubberised coir in stock at Martins Upholstery Supplies.

This commitment to the craft, even from the vantage point of material supply, has extended far beyond materials and commerce, contributing to profound and often transformative impacts on the lives of those engaged with the trade. In discussing the cultural value of craft, Law reflects on the continuity embedded in well-made furniture. “The physical pieces that were made still exist… perpetuating the usefulness of these pieces is core. It is like a connective tissue that binds generations that didn’t know each other. If you have traditional upholstery skills, you are able to perpetuate this connection.” He also speaks passionately about the restorative power of craft, referencing the work of Jamika Smith and her non-profit organisation, Teena’s Legacy. The program offers more than technical instruction in furniture upholstery; it creates a transformative learning environment that cultivates practical life skills, provides vital socio-economic support and empowers learners to move beyond past adversity, restoring both confidence and self-worth through craft (Teena’s Legacy 2024)

Reflecting on his own country’s experience, Law observes that beginning in the 1980’s, the United Kingdom suffered a precipitous loss of upholstery skills as workshops closed, apprenticeships dried up and craftspeople retired. He explains, “The general domestic market turned its back on traditional skills.” Then, “there was a cultural shift in 2008”, Law remembers. He was then working at a furniture workshop in London that had managed to survive the decimation, or culling, of the craft trade. He described the shift as a return to craft skills. “The 2011 WorldSkills Competition held at (London) Excel was a watershed moment. We hosted it, but we couldn’t field candidates in a vast majority of areas”. During this time the UK was facing a broader skills shortage and training gap nationwide, driven by an ageing workforce and a shortfall in apprenticeships. While the British team went on to fill the team in most categories and place fifth in the competition, Law sees this initial struggle as a wake-up call that ultimately sparked renewed investment in heritage skills. Since this time, England has clawed back its heritage skills and is now teaching these trades at the highest levels. The current AMUSF syllabus, the most recognised

upholstery diploma that is taught, was designed in 2005. The United Kingdom has not yet been able to fully restore their apprenticeship system, at least not for upholstery. There is no clear path in the trade as there used to be. We still have a functioning government supported apprenticeship system in Australia. Law's message for Australia is unambiguous:

"You can save it now, before these crafts disappear."

I left Kent with a profound sense of urgency and possibility. Law's combination of incredible skill, deeply generous sharing of knowledge, honest and heartfelt environmental accountability and genuine passion for his craft offered an inspiring model for what Australian upholstery education could become, a craft rooted in tradition, responsive to modern challenges and committed to shaping a sustainable future. My time in Kent had brought together every thread of the fellowship so far, the technical discipline of Verdier, the historical clarity and depth of teaching excellence by Rees, and the sustainable principles championed by Fetherstone-Dilke. Law's classroom was a reminder that craft can honour its past while responding intelligently and ethically to the demands of the present. As I departed Kent, I carried with me not only new skills but a renewed belief in the capacity of the upholstery community to shape its own future, through shared knowledge, generosity and collective purpose. It felt fitting then, that the final part of the fellowship travels was not a workshop, but a gathering, a celebration of this very community. The Festival of Upholstery awaited: a place where upholsterers from across the world would converge to demonstrate, discuss, question and champion the craft they love. It promised to be not only a culmination of the fellowship journey, but a glimpse into what a vibrant, connected future for upholstery could truly look like.

Festival of Upholstery

Figure 19. Festival of Upholstery.

Early in 2025, a single social media post announcing a proposed two-day event celebrating the craft was enough to ignite a sense of anticipation. Even before the fellowship had been awarded, I had quietly resolved to attend, should the festival go ahead. When it was confirmed for October 2025, the event became the central anchor in the planning of the research journey.

The concept for the festival originated at a meeting of the Guild of Traditional Upholsterers. Traditional master upholsterer Kirsty Lockwood volunteered to lead the team that would organise the event. Lockwood was not satisfied merely with a small stand at a larger furnishings trade show to advocate for upholstery, the exceptional quality of the upholstery work in the United Kingdom was something to celebrate and showcase. Thus the Festival of Upholstery was born.

The festival itself was held at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, within the historic Royal Military College building, completed in 1812. The grandeur of the venue lent a sense of significance to the occasion, this was not merely an industry showcase, but a celebration of heritage, artistry and the enduring cultural value of upholstery. Stallholders represented a wide variety of aspects of the craft: the AMUSF, the Guild of Traditional Upholsterers, the Worshipful Company of Upholders, fabric weavers, caners, lampshade makers, French polishers, passementerie makers and specialist suppliers. The diversity of exhibitors highlighted the complexity of the trade and its many disciplines. Throughout the festival, the programme was alive with demonstrations and lectures. Cane weavers and cushion makers shared their expertise, while panel discussions explored the practicalities of translating traditional craft into modern business environments. Particularly memorable was the live recording of the Sit on This podcast with hosts Vicky Grubb and Ray Clarke, the latter serving as the incumbent president of the AMUSF. Their interview with upholstery conservator Heather Porter illuminated the critical distinctions between restoration and conservation, and the nuanced responsibilities of upholsterers working with historically significant pieces.

Figure 20. Passementerie artisan Helen Fry's stand at the festival (@helenfryweaving).

Figure 21. Upholsterer and lampshade maker, Joanna Heptinstall's stand at the festival (@lampshade_maker).

Figure 22. Caning demonstration by Sonia White (@white. bespoke).

Figure 23. Vicky Grubb, Heather Porter and Ray Clarke, for The Sit on This Podcast.

Among the most impactful presentations was the talk delivered by Cecily Benson, an upholsterer who had originally trained as a teacher. Stepping into the lead tutor role at the well-respected and much loved upholstery school run by her mother, after her mother experienced an unexpected illness, Benson brought together her teaching expertise and a deep commitment to the craft. Her reflections on the 'Hidden Values of Teaching' resonated profoundly with me. She described students whose lives had been reshaped through upholstery, not only those pursuing creative fulfilment, but individuals healing from trauma, including a student formerly in the military who found in the craft a means of rebuilding confidence and coping with PTSD. These experiences echoed broader narratives within textile and craft therapy traditions, such as those documented by Clare Hunter in Threads of Life, where the act of making becomes a vehicle for dignity, renewal and connection. (Hunter, C. 2019). Hunter is a textile artist and curator, whose work at Leverndale Hospital in Glasgow with a group of male patients suffering severe mental illness, brought to light for her the power of craft. As they worked together, creating new curtains for the hospital's café, she saw pride and dignity returned to these men. Historically, crafts were understood to have healing properties and at the inception of occupational therapy, handicrafts were integral to its practice. Hunter describes how crafts were used to heal returned serviceman from WWI. "Mastering craft skills boosted self-esteem and confidence in new abilities, but also had other physical benefits: the exercise of wasted muscles, the practice of hand-eye coordination, the steadying of hands and minds.. it was embroidery that became the absorbing occupation for thousands of ex-servicemen, affording them not just the satisfaction of skilled accomplishment, but also a means to boost self-worth and earn a little income." (Hunter, C. 2019, pg. 43).

Figure 24. The team behind Creative Upholstery Classes in Dorset: Anna, Cecily and Sally.

These stories brought renewed meaning to my own work in VET. Technical education is often framed solely in terms of industry demand and workplace development, yet the festival further highlighted a deeper truth discovered throughout this fellowship: learning a craft can change the trajectory of a life. It can offer structure, purpose, confidence and healing, outcomes that, although intangible, are profoundly significant and relevant for the world we live in today.

The festival was also a joyful reunion. Many of the remarkable people encountered during the fellowship, trainers and fellow upholsterers, were present. Conversation flowed freely among craftspeople from Finland, Sweden, the United States, across Europe and throughout the UK. The sense of community was electric. Here was a network of practitioners deeply invested in the future of their craft, united by shared values and a dedication to excellence.

The international comparison prompted a reflection on Australia's position. Unlike other countries, Australia lacks an upholstery-specific association. I considered the examples of the United Kingdom and the United States, where upholsterers have formed their own governing and educational bodies. The impact has been transformative on the craft, as the associations have improved training quality, professional standards and community cohesion. The success of the National Upholstery Association and Upholstery Education in the US, both founded by upholsterers themselves, suggested a powerful model for industry-led progress and training. The vision of the National Upholstery Association is "to inspire a rebirth of the upholstery profession as a collaborative community of artists, entrepreneurs, historians and champions of sustainability." (National Upholstery Association, n.d. 'Mission and Vision' section). Since 2019, the NUA has organised webinars and training from international master upholsterers for its members. Upholstery Education, founded by upholsterer Louise Cornick, was formed to offer professional education and to train the next generation of artisans to maintain the legacy of craft. They organise in-person training sessions with master upholsterers, where they can provide training in traditional upholstery and craft skills that American upholsterers would otherwise have limited access to.

The Festival of Upholstery demonstrated what is possible when a craft trade community advocated for itself with passion, organisation and shared purpose. It illuminated the extraordinary skill present in contemporary upholstery, the cultural value of preserving traditional techniques and, perhaps most importantly, the profound human impact of craft education. I left Sandhurst inspired and determined, recognising that Australia has both the opportunity and the responsibility to build upon these global examples, strengthening its own upholstery community and securing the future of the trade.

05

How can these learnings benefit Australia and VET

The experiences gathered throughout the fellowship reveal a compelling truth: Australia stands at a pivotal moment in the future of its upholstery trade. The combination of limited training providers, diminished access to traditional craft knowledge and a workforce that is ageing out of passing on essential skills, presents a genuine risk to the sustainability and excellence of the profession.

At the same time, many apprentices train in specialised production-focused workplaces where they perform a set of specific tasks. While this offers efficiency for the employer, it restricts exposure to the broad skillset required for mastery, reinforcing the technical school's role in developing well-rounded upholsterers. These gaps in on-the-job learning mirror the labour division concerns explored earlier in the report, where the fragmentation of skilled work reduces creative engagement and limits the development of deep craft capability.

The fellowship learnings directly address these challenges. The teaching approaches observed in the UK demonstrate that high-quality craft education relies on meaningful bench time, rigorously structured skill development and the cultivation of curiosity and independence in learners. These are not luxuries, they are essential conditions for maintaining a craft-based trade.

Furthermore, the fellowship highlighted that the future of upholstery must involve a considered return to sustainable materials and hand skills. The reduction of use and shift away from petro-chemical based foams is no longer hypothetical. As the report notes, the environmental burden of polyurethane foam signals a clear need for suitable alternatives and for graduates trained to understand and implement them. This is backed up by parallel research. In the aforementioned 2023 ARC report, The Value of Craft Skills to the Future of Making in Australia, it points out, "With digital technologies promising to revolutionise advanced manufacturing, how to re-imagine and re-value the sustainability of our relationship to materials, processes of production and the high turnover of products is a key contemporary challenge. Craft, with its history of respect for materials and quality workmanship (Sennett 2008), offers a valuable lens through which to explore how this might be possible….In the digital future, craft skills embedded and working in collaboration with industry will be essential to innovation as Australia looks to develop high-end advanced manufacturing. However, our capacity to grow pioneering manufacturing is profoundly threatened by the generational loss of often highly embodied crafts and hands-on making expertise" (Luckman, S., Tower, A. 2023, pg.14).

The effects of this fellowship have directly impacted the Victorian VET Sector. As the only school training upholstery apprentices in Victoria, it has had an immediate effect on the students. After careful consultation within Holmesglen Institute, I have implemented a more advanced training program for the unit MSFUP3015 Apply traditional foundations to upholstered furniture. This unit is an optional elective unit, amongst the 20 choices of elective units, of which only 13 are selected to combine with the 12 core units. These altogether make up the 25 units the Cert III in Upholstery is comprised of . What this means is that this unit in traditional upholstery may not be included in a Cert III, if the school packaging the program feels it is irrelevant to learning, or if they cannot provide the training. As this report has proven, this path would be detrimental to the advancement of the trade, weakening the knowledge base of its graduate upholsterers. I am incredibly grateful that Holmesglen Institute values this unit and has encouraged me to improve the training delivered. The practical assessment of this unit is 3 x pieces to be traditionally upholstered and it is now, thanks to the fellowship and the research gathered, being taught at Holmesglen to a high standard. However , more traditional training throughout the course and earlier in the students training, via skill-building exercises, is advised.

What this means for the broader national upholstery industry is an urgent return to prioritising the teaching of this unit within the VET sector. Teachers need to be supported with these changes and training so that they can deliver this unit to a high standard. If this unit is not prioritised, we risk losing these skills country-wide. I have spoken to graduates across Australia who have not been taught traditional skills beyond coil springing, which is an important foundational skill, but one that does not develop an understanding of sustainable and traditional materials, yet they have received a Cert III in Upholstery. If this continues, we will weaken the industry by providing graduates with a limited skill base, unable to innovate with materials and unable to adapt to a circular economy.

Australia's VET system is well placed to lead this transition to craft skills and material literacy, with a focus on traditional techniques and fibres. The unit MSMENV272 Participate in Environmentally Sustainable Work Practices was removed as a core requirement in 2022, with sustainability principles embedded across all units instead. This creates a unique opportunity, as upholstery teachers are now encouraged to integrate sustainable thinking into every aspect of delivery, from materials selection to construction methods. The fellowship learnings demonstrate exactly how this can be accomplished in practice.

Key opportunities for Australia include:

1. Strengthening Traditional Craft Foundations and Embedding Sustainability as a Technical Skillset.

Training with master upholsterers reaffirmed the importance of beginning with traditional techniques to build the tactile intelligence and problem solving capacity required in advanced upholstery. These foundational skills not only support excellence in restoration and heritage work, but also equip future upholsterers with the skills to innovate with natural and emerging sustainable materials. From Fetherstone-Dilke's work, it became clear that sustainable materials require a high level of craft proficiency to implement effectively. Without strong hand skills, upholsterers cannot work effectively with natural fibres. Her assertion that "without traditional upholstery we won't have the craft skills to know how to transition into a circular economy" provides a powerful direction for the future of Australian training.

2. Reinvigorating Australian Material Supply Chains.

The fellowship revealed numerous opportunities for Australia to re-establish access to sustainable materials, particularly rubberised coir and locally produced wool and fibre products. Discussions with industry figures highlighted the quality and competitiveness of Australian wool in international markets, raising vital questions about why our own industry does not utilise this readily available resource.

3. Enhancing VET through International Benchmarking.

Observations of the AMUSF programs showed the value of smaller class sizes, or an improved ratio of teachers to students. It also highlighted the importance of extensive practice exercises and structured skill progression. While Australia's Certificate III in Upholstery has different demands, elements of these teaching approaches could strengthen training quality and improve apprentice engagement. In particular, an improved understanding of hand skills and materials early on in the course would greatly improve the Certificate III.

4. Building an Upholstery Community and Professional Identity.

The fellowship repeatedly demonstrated the power of professional networks, through guilds, associations, and collaborative events such as the Festival of Upholstery. Unlike the UK or US, Australia lacks a dedicated upholstery association, which limits collective advocacy, resource sharing and sector-wide professional development. The fellowship suggests that Australia would benefit substantially from an industry-led body to support quality training, promote sustainability and celebrate the craft.

In summary, the fellowship has provided a clear direction for how Australian VET can meet the challenges facing the upholstery industry:

- By reclaiming and strengthening traditional craft skills
- By embedding sustainability deeply and meaningfully into training
- By revitalising local supply chains
- By drawing on international teaching models
- By nurturing a strong, interconnected craft community

These learnings affirm that Australia has both the capacity and the responsibility to protect and advance the upholstery trade. The transition to a more sustainable, skilled and resilient industry begins with education, and the time for that transition is now.

06

Personal and Professional Impact

It is difficult for me to speak about personal impact without also speaking about upholstery. Upholstery for me has never been just a job, it is a passion and a craft that I love. The fellowship provided the rare opportunity to explore in depth, aspects of the trade that I had previously only admired from a distance. Through immersive training with the master upholsterers, I rediscovered a love of learning and research, reigniting an intellectual and creative energy that has shaped my professional aspirations.

The experience was transformative. It opened doors that I had never imagined could be opened, doors to workshops, traditions and conversations that fundamentally shifted my understanding of my craft. The research conducted throughout the fellowship has provided clarity and direction, enabling me to identify and pursue future research pathways with genuine impact for both the students and the industry.

Learning directly from master upholsterers, craftspeople whose skill and artistry I have long admired, was not only a career highlight but a life highlight. Their generosity, talent and insights into the trade offered reassurance that my concerns about the state of the craft were valid, and, importantly, that these challenges are shared globally and are being addressed collaboratively.

The kindness, friendship and mentorship received during the fellowship reinforced the importance of human connection in the transmission of craft knowledge. I returned to Australia with renewed determination and purpose, committed not only to preserving the craft, but to empowering the students to contribute to its future. There is now, more hope that environmental impact can be reduced, that new sustainable directions can be forged, and that crafts skills can endure through the next generation.

07 Considerations

The fellowship has illuminated a series of critical considerations for the future of the upholstery trade in Australia, considerations that speak not only to training, but to culture, sustainability and the long-term resilience of the craft itself. As the industry stands at a crossroads, we must confront the realities shaping upholstery today while imagining the possibilities of what it could become.

A central consideration is the question of best-practice upholstery learning. The techniques observed throughout the fellowship, grounded in traditional methods, refined through centuries of craftsmanship and applied with extraordinary precision, demonstrate what is possible when time, skill and teaching converge. These approaches highlight that excellence in upholstery does not arise by chance, it is cultivated. Australia must now consider how such practices can be meaningfully translated into our VET landscape, ensuring that students develop not only competence, but high-level skill . Another key part of this consideration is the pace of skill development. Sustainable upholstery methods may initially take longer for students to execute, but the fellowship experience suggests that with practice, techniques become not only efficient but cost-effective. I have observed that a first-year student may take nearly a full day to complete a modern drop-in seat, yet an experienced upholsterer in a small workshop can complete twelve in a morning. The same logic applies to traditional hand-built fillings. With time, knowledge and refinement, what appears slow becomes swift and what appears expensive in labour becomes sustainable. As the AMUSF model shows, training these students early on in traditional techniques, using sustainable fibres, will increase their knowledge and skill set. This will enable them to become upholsterers capable of understanding form, with high level skill, able to contribute meaningfully to their industry and to enjoy greater work satisfaction.

A second consideration is the direction of material innovation. The fellowship made clear that the long-standing reliance on polyurethane foam as the only filling material, is incompatible with the environmental challenges facing the sector today. As sustainable alternatives emerge, some promising, some still experimental, the industry must decide how to integrate these materials into training, production and design. Crucially, this transition cannot rely on materials alone, it requires a workforce skilled enough to use them effectively. Sustainable materials demand strong hand skills, refined judgement and the confidence to build comfort and longevity through layered, biodegradable systems. This is not a return to an obsolete past, it is the future of skilled craft. This also raises questions about industry readiness. Change in upholstery has historically been driven by manufacturers and suppliers, who determine what upholsterers can purchase and use. In turn, suppliers are influenced by what upholsterer's request, and indirectly by what consumers understand and demand. Consumers did not ask for polyurethane foam, it was introduced, marketed and adopted by the industry. The same will be true of sustainable materials. If the trade embraces natural fibres, layered construction and long lasting

fillings, then suppliers will respond. If upholsterers continue to default to foam, alternatives will remain scarce and expensive. This makes the role of educators even more vital, VET can shape the expectations and habits of future upholsterers, thereby shaping the market itself. On a recent visit to The Melbourne Material Library, curated by Sarah D'Sylva of company hyloh, I had a chance to explore innovative sustainable materials, particularly marketed towards the building and design trades. This materials library is the first of its kind in Australia and D'Sylva commented on the incredible feedback they have received during its pop up season. Australia is ready for this return to material literacy and ready to encourage sustainable change. A quote on the materials library website from Caitlin Phillips-Peddlesden, the Circular Lead at RMIT Activator highlights this readiness for change, "Let's work to get something like this permanently hosted in the city, sparking inspiration and access to circular and regenerative materials for our circular transition.." (Melbourne Material Library, n.d).

Finally, the fellowship invites Australia to consider its place within the global movement toward sustainable craft. Other nations have acted decisively, forming associations, rebuilding training systems, strengthening material supply chains, and reinvesting in their heritage skills. Australia has the opportunity, not yet lost, to do the same. We can lead in the development of sustainable systems, support local fibre industries, and preserve the rich craft of upholstery before the skills disappear. But this will require collective action, curiosity and a willingness to reimagine what upholstery can be.

The path forward is not yet fully formed, and there is much research still to be done. Yet the fellowship has made one thing clear: Australia is capable of contributing meaningfully to this global shift. With investment in education, renewed attention to traditional skills and a deliberate exploration of locally sourced materials, we can position ourselves as leaders, not followers, in a movement toward a circular, skilled and sustainable upholstery industry.

08

Dissemination and Stakeholder Engagement

The impact of this fellowship is already being felt in the classroom. Since returning to Holmesglen, I have begun integrating the traditional and sustainable methods explored during the research journey directly into my teaching practice. Students have responded with remarkable enthusiasm. In recent classes, I have observed students instinctively reaching for natural fibres instead of foam, experimenting with a blend of coir and wool, mirroring the very processes demonstrated by Fetherstone-Dilke in Richmond. These students are not merely replicating techniques; they are adopting a new mindset, one in which sustainability and craftsmanship are inseparable. In addition to embedding these methods into classroom delivery, I have also established a materials library at Holmesglen to support ongoing exploration and innovation. This dedicated space allows students to handle, compare and blend a wide range of sustainable and recyclable fibres, such as wool, coir, hemp, horsehair, banana fibre, eucalyptus fibre, grasses and emerging bio-based alternatives, so that they can develop a tactile understanding of how each material behaves in upholstery constructions. By giving the students the opportunity to touch, test and experiment with these fibres firsthand, the materials library fosters curiosity, encourages independent inquiry and reinforces the central message of the fellowship: that the future of upholstery is grounded in knowledge, craftsmanship and confidence with materials. The library has already become a valuable resource within the workshop, enabling students to physically experience what is possible and to imagine their future practice through a more circular and environmentally responsible lens.

Figure 25. Holmesglen Materials Library.

Figure 26. Holmesglen Materials Library.

Figure 27. Holmesglen students making a traditional squab.

The transformation occurring in the workshop reveals a powerful truth: when students are shown the possibilities of traditional materials used in contemporary ways, they eagerly rise to the challenge. Many are already developing the confidence to question the default use of polyurethane foam and are beginning to explore layered, biodegradable alternatives seriously, not as a novelty.

I propose the next steps to increase dissemination and improve traditional upholstery training:

1. Further integration and engagement with training and industry, including the development of an upholstery association. Upholsterers need to be aware of new developments in their trade and to have a say in the direction of the industry. Establishing an association dedicated to advancing these interests and advocating for upholsterers would represent an important step toward strengthening the industry's skilled workforce. Such an association could provide access to crucial professional development for trained upholsterers, while also supporting businesses in educating consumers about the value and importance of quality upholstery. It would also offer the industry a much-needed collective voice and a platform from which to advance and sustain the craft of upholstery in Australia.

2. Improvement to the Australian supply chain. I have already initiated discussions with several suppliers to improve access to alternative materials, particularly rubberised coir and wool-based products. To support my endeavours, I have contacted upholsterers throughout Victoria to gauge interest in adopting these materials. The strong support expressed indicates that the industry is willing to explore this transition. The next step is for Australian suppliers to respond to this interest by supporting the shift and having confidence that the industry will adopt these materials as they have in the UK and USA.

3. Improvements to the delivery of the Certificate III in Upholstery. Development is needed of smaller skill-building exercises to increase knowledge and material literacy throughout the course and to engage the students as early as possible with alternative materials to polyurethane foam. Currently the unit MSFUP3015 Apply traditional foundations to upholstered furniture, is delivered towards the end of the Certificate III in Upholstery at Holmesglen Institute. When smaller, targeted

exercises are performed earlier, this will increase hand skill development and make the engagement with the traditional unit even more beneficial to the student and ultimately to the trade.

4. Continued improvement of and engagement with the Holmesglen materials library. Encouraging students to engage directly with, contribute to, and experiment with a range of fibres may foster the lateral thinking required for the industry to develop a viable alternative to polyurethane foam. Few professionals are better positioned to understand the functional requirements of future materials than carefully trained upholsterers themselves. By equipping students with strong craft-based hand skills and providing access to emerging fibre alternatives, the likelihood that they will contribute to meaningful material innovation is significantly increased.

To extend this impact beyond the classroom and strengthen the links between training, industry and supply chains, I propose to host an Industry Breakfast at Holmesglen. This event will bring together employers of upholstery apprentices, Australian suppliers of sustainable materials and VET educators and leaders. The purpose of this gathering is two-fold. First, it offers stakeholders the opportunity to observe students work first hand, to see for themselves the application of rubberised coir, wool wadding, blended fibres, and hand stitched traditional constructions within modern upholstery projects. This visibility is crucial. Industry change rarely begins with policy alone, what is needed is for industry to witness the capability and enthusiasm of the next generation. Second, the breakfast provides a platform for dialogue across the supply chain, from the producers of the sustainable fibres, to the employers who will ultimately support apprentices in implementing these materials on the workshop floor.

Bringing these groups together aligns with the fellowship's broader findings, the preservation and advancement of upholstery skills rely on community, communication and the shared stewardship of craft. The Festival of Upholstery demonstrated what is possible when industry gathers with a common purpose, a similar spirit can and should be cultivated in Australia.

By showcasing student work, facilitating direct industry engagement and encouraging sustainable material innovation, it will serve as a catalyst for building a stronger, more connected upholstery sector, one in which education, industry, and material suppliers collaborate to secure a skilled and sustainable future for the trade.

09 Conclusion

When this fellowship began, I reflected on a moment during the induction ceremony when another fellow asked, “What is upholstery?” a question that revealed how unseen the craft often is, despite its presence in nearly every part of daily life. This fellowship has reaffirmed that while upholstery may be hidden in plain sight, its importance - to comfort, to culture and now to sustainability, can no longer remain invisible.

Through the transformative weeks of international training, I have witnessed what becomes possible when upholstery is understood, respected and taught as a craft of depth, intelligence and environmental responsibility. Working with the master upholsterers, Armand Verdier, Gareth Rees, Delyth Fetherstone-Dilke and Alex Law revealed four truths:

1. That traditional skills are a foundation for excellence
2. That skilled teaching transforms lives
3. That sustainability requires knowledge and hand skills
4. That craft can and must lead cultural change.

The United Kingdom provided a model of what intentional craft stewardship can achieve. Each master upholsterer offered a different window into the future of the trade. Verdier’s craft discipline and skill, Rees’s teaching brilliance and the remarkable outcomes of his students, Fetherstone-Dilke’s conviction and activism educating and changing the industry, and Law’s dedication to passing on his knowledge, environmental ethics, innovation and deep respect for hand skills. Together, their teachings form a powerful blueprint for a renewed and resilient Australian upholstery industry.

The early signs are evident in the Holmesglen workshop. Students are blending fibres, replacing foam with natural fibres and engaging with sustainable materials enthusiastically. Their curiosity is sparking conversations about environmental impact and material longevity. When offered pathways that integrate tradition and sustainability, students do not hesitate, they lead. This shift marks something hopeful . Consumer knowledge and apprentice knowledge can reshape industry practice. The general public may not know what makes up their upholstery, but as students carry these skills into their workplaces, they will be the ones to help consumers understand that a chair can be made differently, repaired differently, and valued differently. Sustainability movements have never begun with consumers alone, they begin with the people who make, repair, educate and innovate. With upholsterers. Material transformation will require collaboration to cultivate new methods, evaluate fibre-based constructions and envision shared pathways forward. This is how industry cultures shift, through conversations, collective insight and shared investment in the next generation. Other nations have already taken decisive steps. In the UK they rebuilt craft networks and educational bodies, in the US they created upholsterer-led associations to raise standards and strengthen community. Australia has the opportunity to learn from these examples, cultivating its own professional identity

and advancing innovation rooted in tradition and local materials.

If we fail to act, we risk losing vital craft knowledge. If we act now, intentionally, collaboratively and with conviction, we can safeguard and advance a trade of enormous cultural and environmental value. Most importantly, this fellowship has strengthened my belief that upholstery can become not only more visible, but more valued. As consumer awareness grows, driven by knowledgeable students, educators and craftspeople, upholstery will no longer be the quiet companion beneath our daily routines. Rather, it will be recognised as a craft capable of shaping a more sustainable and healthy future.

10 References

Jobs and Skills Atlas. (2025). Occupation, upholsterers. Accessed 28/11/2025. https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/jobs-and-skills-atlas/occupation?regionType=state&regionValue=aus&industryFocus=H&occupationFocus=3933&occupationMetric=summary

Smith, A. (1776) 1976 An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. Edited by R.H Campbell and A.S Skinner. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Veckie, V.W., Veckie, E.A. (2021). Vocational Knowledge Transfer of Craft Master Skills in Post-Industrial Era, Annals of Faculty Engineering Hunedoara - International Journal of Engineering, May 2021, Canada. https://annals.fih.upt.ro/pdf-full/2021/ANNALS-2021-2-10.pdf

Braverman, H. (1974) 1998 Labour and the monopoly capital: the degradation of work in the twentieth century. 25th anniversary edn. New York: Monthly Review Press, p.3.

Haller, R.K. (2024). Improving Employee Retention: Evidence from “Best Practices” in the Craft Sector to Tackle the Labor Shortage of Skilled Workers. In: Tsounis, N., Vlachvei, A. (eds) Applied Economic Research and Trends. ICOAE 2023. Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics. Springer, Cham.

Binder, M. and Blankenberg, A.K., (2022). Identity and well-being in the skilled crafts and trades. Kyklos, 75(2), pp.184-235.

Luckman, S., Tower, A., (2023). The Value of Craft Skills to the Future of Making in Australia, The Creative People, Products and Places Research Centre, University of South Australia, Adelaide

Rosslim, R, Amir Hashim, M. Y., Augurio, P. T., 2012, Natural Latex Foam, Journal of Engineering Science, Vol. 8, 15–27, Malaysia.

Peng, S., Gong, D., Zhou, Y., Zhang, C., Li, Y., and Sheng, Y. (2022). Study on Green Degredation Process of Polyurethane Foam Based on Integral Utilization and Performance of Recycled Polyurethane Oil-Absorbing Foam. Materials, 15(12), 4269, China. https://www.mdpi.com/1996-1944/15/12/4269

Sakib, M. N., Kabir, G., Ali S.M., (2024) A life cycle analysis approach to evaluate sustainable strategies in the furniture manufacturing industry. Science of the Total Environment, volume 907, Jan 2024.

Sayed, I.M. (1984) Foams Used in Upholstery, UNIDO Listed Report, Seminar on Furniture and Joinery Industries, 6-24 August 1984, Mauritius. https://www.unido.org/publications/ot/9650369/pdf

Jonidi Jafari A, Tangestani M, Zarezadeh E., (2025) Confronting the Environmental Fallout due to Polyurethane Waste and Microplastic Pollution: Mini-review. Shahroud Journal of Medical Sciences 2025;11 (4):57-67, Iran

Alford, K.L.; Kumar, N., 2021. Pulmonary Health Effects of Indoor Volatile Organic Compounds—A Meta-Analysis. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2021, 18, 1578. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041578

Babrauskas, V., Blum, A., Daley, R. and Birnbaum, L., 2011. Flame retardants in furniture foam: benefits and risks. Fire Safety Science, 10, pp.265-278., USA.

Slater, D., 2012. Is this the most dangerous thing in your house?. The New York Times Magazine, pp.22-L, USA.

Green Science Policy, 2026., About, Accessed 10/01/26. https://greensciencepolicy.org/about/

Cleland, L., 2026. Country and Town House, Future Icons – Power People, Accessed 10/02/2026. https://www.countryandtownhouse.com/future-icons/power-list/

McDonough, W. and Braungart, M., 2002 Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things. North Point Press, New York.

Chan, D., 2023. The ‘Green’ Future of Furniture is a Sofa Stuffed with Seaweed, Wired, Accessed 16/12/2025. https://www.wired.com/story/agoprene-seaweed-furniture-stuffing/

Harrison Spinks, 2026, Accessed 02/02/2026 https://www.harrisonspinks.com.au/our-story/sustainability

Law, A., 2015. The Upholsterer’s Step By Step Handbook: A practical reference. Pavilion Books, UK.

Law, A., 2017.beachclean chair full video, Alex Law, Accessed 10/01/2026, https://youtu.be/PvK3qFKRyxk?si=uON2l59-1I1JEea-

John Lewis eco-foam, 2023, Accessed 10/01/2026. https://www.expertreviews.co.uk/sleep/mattresses/john-lewis-partners-classic-eco-800-mattress-review

Teena’s Legacy, 2024, Accessed 10/01/2026, https://teenaslegacy.com/home

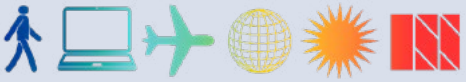
Holmes, H., Burgess, G., 2024. Construction and Building Trades: The Skills Horizon, University of Cambridge, Accessed 10/01/2026, https://www.landecon.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/PfP%20Skills%20Final%20Report.pdf

Hunter, C., 2019. Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle. Sceptre, London.

National Upholstery Association, n.d., Accessed 10/01/2026, https://www.nationalupholsteryassociation.org/

Upholstery Education, 2025, Accessed 10/01/2026, https://upholsteryeducation.com/

Melbourne Material Library, n.d., Accessed 24/02/2026, https://www.melbournemateriallibrary.com/




International
Specialised
Skills
Institute
est. 1991