



Alumna Subject

Claire Watt-Smith
BSc, Management Studies with French
Masters in European Business and Spanish
2005, 2006



Graduated Place of Work Position

BoBelle, London
Owner

Claire founded BoBelle at only 23 years of age. She became fascinated by business ethics while at Royal Holloway, so decided to set up her own eco-friendly and ethical fashion accessory business. Claire's accessory product line is made of eel skin leather, a by-product of the Asian food industry. BoBelle has been featured in publications including *Red*, *Business Review*, *InStyle*, *Drapers*, *The Times* and *The Daily Mail*. BoBelle's accessory line is now sold in over 50 retail shops, including Fenwick Brent Cross.

Great minds go on to great places

Why did you choose to study at Royal Holloway?

My tutors at College advised me on the best universities to apply to. I knew I had to go for a good university with a good degree and Royal Holloway is a very highly established university. When I visited Royal Holloway, it was a spectacular day and when I saw Founder's I thought 'yes this is it!' – it was just beautiful and the people were so friendly.

What did you enjoy most about your undergraduate degree?

With Management Studies at Royal Holloway, you learn about the history of management and how it evolves, which really appealed to me. I wanted to learn statistics, accountancy, history, ethics and strategy. My favourite module was strategy - it's so interesting and all businesses need strategy. Despite accountancy being my most difficult subject, it has really helped me in my business, especially for structuring my balance sheets and profit and loss. Business ethics was another module I loved, as were the international management modules.

Were you part of any societies at Royal Holloway?

I set up, and was President of, the French Society in my second year, which gained around 70 members. We went to the cinema to watch French films, had wine and cheese nights, organised a French book club, and speakers came in to share their experience of their year abroad.

Why did you decide to do a Masters?

I went on to study for a Masters at Royal Holloway in European Business because I knew I wanted to learn more. My Masters has helped so much in terms of my business – it is like the ribbon on a gift. I really enjoyed it, because you start to come out of your shell and learn so much more.

What was your overall Royal Holloway experience like?

I couldn't have asked for anything more – the whole Royal Holloway experience helped to mould me as a person. It was fun – you work hard, but you play hard. You get out what you put in – this has always been my philosophy. I also made some really great friends.

Have your studies helped you in your career?

Yes, without a doubt. My degrees have given me the confidence to know what I am talking about. At one point I was giving a presentation every two weeks at Royal Holloway, and this has helped me a lot with my career. Setting up a business without my Royal Holloway degree would have been very difficult.

What are your ambitions for the future?

I still want to develop my brand in the UK, but I am keen to build networks overseas. Ultimately I want to be the ethical fashion leader in the marketplace, at least for accessories.

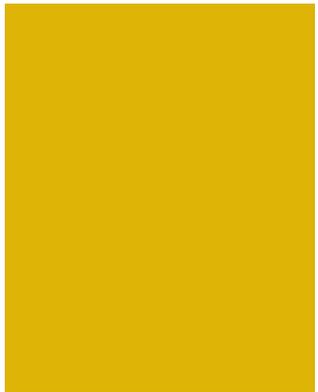
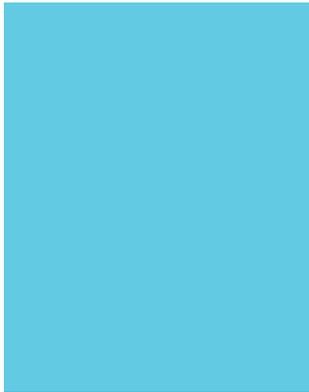
Where do your design inspirations come from?

They come in so many different ways. I'm always thinking of ideas and chopping and changing. At trade exhibitions, you get a good idea of what sells. The eel skin is still very niche, and the colours are very striking. I try to keep my products classical, with a modern twist.



people with passion

“My degrees have given me the confidence to know what I am talking about.”

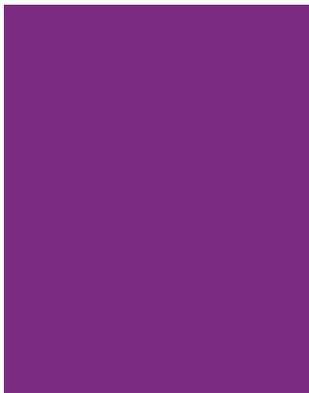


Why did you decide to set up your own business?

I've always wanted to set up my own business. I love business because that's my passion. I love reading about it and I'm a keen observer of marketing tactics.

Can you tell us about the philosophy behind BoBelle?

My mum has an eel skin wallet, and this is where the idea for my business came from. I also came across it whilst travelling. The skin is so soft and strong - they are hand made and hand dyed. I am environmentally friendly and ethical in everything I do e.g. acid free tissue paper that the products are wrapped in and recycled ribbons. Also, the jiffy bags are 100 percent recycled and the packaging is biodegradable filler. I always try to use small businesses as much as possible e.g. the local hardware shop.



What do you do on a typical day and what are the best parts?

No two days are the same. I love the networking, meeting new people and exposing the BoBelle brand. It's all about growing and getting the name out as much as possible.

I love reading people's feedback. When I get an email saying, 'thank you so much for the bag', and asking when the new collection is out, it's such an amazing feeling. Also, I love going past a shop and seeing my products - that is such a nice feeling too.

What are the drawbacks of working for yourself?

I work all the time - seven days a week, but I love it. You don't have much money at the start and I haven't been able to get a business loan because of the recession, so I had to get a personal loan. Also, you don't have people around to bounce ideas off, however, through networking, you gain ideas. Sometimes you have a bad day, and then you have a great one. You're never going to be able to tick off everything.

What would be your top tip for students wanting to set up their own business?

You have to 100 percent believe in what you are doing. You need to have determination, because I can tell you there are some days when you can feel rock bottom. At the start of setting up my business, I got little recognition - this is always difficult in fashion. You have to think logically and juggle lots of things. You have people constantly calling you, but I've met so many people who can assist me in so many different ways. You need to know your strengths and weaknesses and think about where you want the business to go.

What connection have you had with Royal Holloway since graduating?

I was recently asked to come back to present and speak with Royal Holloway students and share my experience. I would definitely come back for alumni events - the Alumni in the City event sounds really appealing.

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