



Embedding Employability at London South Bank University: A process of evolution or design?

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Summary

This case study describes and discusses the experience of embedding employability into the curriculum of the Business Programme at London South Bank University. The study starts at a point where the Business Programme underwent a major review/revalidation in 1996 and ends with the intended module revisions planned for 2005/06. It outlines what we were trying to achieve in the area of graduate employability, how this was underpinned by our philosophy of learning and teaching and the methods we used to achieve our objectives.

The story uses two modules to illustrate our approach to embedding employability within the learning experience on the Business Programme. These are a Level 2 core module 'Management Skills' and a Level 3 optional module, 'Life Career Development', it discusses and evaluates our experience and lessons for our own and others' practice are drawn out.

Objectives

In addressing employability in the Business curriculum and developing these modules our objectives were to:

- raise awareness in undergraduates of the need to develop work-relevant skills while studying, in order to move successfully into graduate careers;
- ensure that individual students were empowered to reach their full potential and equipped with the skills to identify and address their personal and career development needs;
- ensure that graduates were well prepared to meet the expectations of future employers and able to make a significant contribution both to the economy and the wider community;
- develop a range of 'framework modules' at different academic levels for use of or sharing by different programmes. Capable of being contextualised for particular student cohorts, these modules would be supported by fully developed student and tutor resources, as well as assessments.

Rationale

At the heart of our approach to embedding employability is the understanding that employability and effective learning are closely aligned (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Attributes, skills and attitudes that contribute to academic attainment correspond closely with the qualities rated highly by employers, namely: management of self, engagement and interaction with others; information literacy and management of task. Our institution has a very diverse student profile and we are committed to enabling such students to 'become what they want to be', not least in the area of employability.

Our commitment to widening participation means that we may offer opportunities to individuals who will have to strive particularly hard in order to reach the level of University graduates. This leads to pressure on LSBU and programme teams to adopt learning and teaching strategies both to support student achievement and contribute to improving retention rates. As in many other HEIs, there is increasing pressure on resources, and increasing demands on academics' time for scholarship, research and managing larger classes. Solutions to the problem had not only to be effective, but also needed to be resource efficient. This led to the development of framework modules and shared re-useable learning resources.

LSBU's vision in its Strategic Development Plan 2003 is of, "a University focussed on the needs of its students and the needs of the London economy and its global counterparts". This recognises not only the aspirations of individuals to access higher education, but also the university's role in contributing to the provision of a skilled workforce (LSBU). This approach to employability fits well with Yorke's (2004:7) definition that employability is "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy".

Graduate employability, for us, is far more than gaining a 'graduate' job. We believe that it also involves the ability to perform successfully in that job, and to have the capacity and willingness to engage in ongoing personal and professional development. Our graduates should move into the world equipped with subject understanding, personal qualities, skills and the capacity to see how these aspects relate to each other and inform their future learning. This meta-cognitive understanding of learning and self development has been evolving for some time in the literature (Flavell, 1976; Lawrence, Roberts & Erdos, 1993; Yorke, 2004).

Context

LSBU is a large, post-1992 institution with a strong tradition of providing vocational education and of engaging in widening participation. It has one of the most diverse student bodies in UK higher education; 60% of students are from ethnic minorities and 44% from social classes IIIM, IV and V. 5% of students have declared disabilities and only 20% of entrants are aged under 21.

The Business Programme evolved during the 1990s from the highly successful BA in Business Studies, originally launched in 1971: it is a significant part of the undergraduate portfolio of the recently formed Faculty of Business, Computing and Information Management (formerly the Business School). The programme consists of a BA in Business Studies, with a placement year, and a BA in Business Administration, with no placement. Level 1 consists of eight core modules (known as Units), including a 'Business Skills' module; they introduce the functional areas of Business. The remainder of the programme provides a high degree of flexibility and choice.

At Level 2 there are two core modules, 'Management Skills' and 'Research Skills for Business'. Students may then begin to specialise in preparation for a functional pathway at Level 3. In the final year there is only one core module, 'Strategic Management', and a double credit project. The remaining Level 3 modules consist of three specialist pathway modules and two option modules from within or outside the specialist curriculum.

There are currently 6-700 full- and part-time students across the programme. Significant numbers transfer in at Level 2 and Level 3 with credit from other LSBU programmes, or from other institutions. The profile of this intake is consistent with

that of the University in general, with a high proportion of overseas and European Union students.

Some 130 students are registered for an HND in Business Studies, which shares the two core modules at Level 2. There are also three combined honours fields, in HRM, Management, and Accounting, with a combined cohort of 250 who share the majority of their modules with single honours students. The Programme is therefore highly complex in curriculum structure, delivery, pattern of recruitment and diversity of intake.

This case study tracks how two modules, 'Management Skills' and 'Life Career Development', are used to embed employability in the curriculum. They have been chosen because developing student employability is an explicit learning outcome of both units. They are not, however, the only way in which employability is addressed in the Programme. Other modules, placement opportunities and a range of extra-curricular activities also allow students to prepare for transition into the workplace. In some cases, however, the employability aspects are currently implicit, rather than explicit.

These two modules were not designed in isolation. They were set within an evolving programme structure, informed by powerful external drivers such as the Dearing Report (1997). It became clear that, in addition to providing knowledge and understanding of Business, our curriculum needed to broaden out. It needed to incorporate both the traditional intellectual skills associated with graduate education and a range of transferable skills valued by both the individual learner and future employers.

Yorke (2004) identifies five 'ideal types' for developing employability through the curriculum:

1. Employability through the whole curriculum
2. Employability in the core curriculum
3. Work-based or work-related learning incorporated as one or more components within the curriculum
4. Employability-related module(s) within the curriculum
5. Work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum

He explains that such 'types' often overlap and are rarely discrete. The approach described in this case study appears to sit within the second and fourth types, although within the wider Business Programme as a whole it is possible to identify examples of types three and five as well.

Description

The two modules chosen for this study are typical of an approach to the design of this type of employability module at LSBU; such 'framework modules' exist at all three levels and are offered on programmes both within Business and in other disciplines such as Computing and Applied Science. Originally used to develop programme specific modules for Business this approach has now been applied to employability modules that are centrally validated and can be taken 'off the shelf' by programme teams and contextualised to particular cohorts of students.

The consistent features of these modules, regardless of level, are that they all

- have explicit outcomes related to personal development;

- have at least one element of assessment that requires the student to write reflectively on where they are, where they would like to be and how they might get there;
- use an inquiry-guided learning approach, and are usually delivered in a workshop style; and
- come with a fully developed set of resources for tutors and students, that can be used, adapted, shared and passed on.

In each case, core values underpin the design of the learning experience: the need to stretch students to engage with current personal and intellectual capacity and to support them in purposeful reflection on how they can develop themselves to reach their personal and career goals.

Management Skills

In 1997 the programme planning team considered that, whilst necessary and worthwhile, the inclusion of specific outcomes for transferable, or key, skills was problematic.

Module development

Personal development, interpersonal communication and team working, were seen as examples of lower order outcomes relative to subject content and 'proper' academic skills like critical thinking, analysis and academic writing. Challenging for staff to deliver, they were not easily explicitly addressed or assessed in 'academic' modules. The solution was to put them into the 'black bag', as it was called, the broadly based Management Skills module. The specific development and delivery of this unit could safely be handed over to 'evangelical' skills tutors!

The programme team was satisfied that, together with a pre-existing Level 1 module, Business Skills, this core unit would deliver all the 'skills' students needed without encroaching on the more traditional academic content in the remainder of the Programme. The other function of Management Skills, in conjunction with a Business Research module, was to form an essential element in the 'ladders and bridges' progression route between the HND in Business Studies and the degree programme. The explicit 'skills-based' approach envisaged in delivering the modules was seen as appropriate to both constituencies.

Aims

The module is concerned with developing the critical, interpersonal and organisational skills needed by a potential manager to function effectively in both internal and external organisational environments. Students are expected to reflect on experiences in the facilitated workshops and to consider how they need to develop their own skills in order to prepare to move into the workplace. Since the central theme of the module is personal development, it is relevant both to students who have little work experience and to those who are already familiar with the working environment prior to choosing to study further.

Management Skills addresses employability through personal development planning, emphasizing self-awareness and the importance of personal effectiveness in managing key business functions. It also develops employability in a broader sense, requiring students to engage with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the business environment. It provides an opportunity to fit subject understanding into the broader context of their own learning, aspirations and beliefs.

Outcomes

The module builds a practical skills base on the foundation of knowledge and competencies gained in other course modules. It provides an important link to the working environment for those students taking the industrial placement year, as well as forming a basis for all students' longer term career planning. It lays conceptual foundations for the final year, by introducing students to business strategy. Specific outcomes are that students will be able to:

- recognise the qualities, capabilities and skills that can contribute to effective management in today's competitive business environment;
- relate to the importance of innovation and creativity in the management of change;
- recognise and select appropriate strategic techniques for application in solving business problems;
- select appropriate sources of information in order to carry out business-focused research;
- reflect on their personal effectiveness as learners and assess their own career development needs; and
- demonstrate and reflect on their own capacity to work independently, and with others, to complete a set of tasks and to communicate their solutions effectively, orally and in writing.

Learning and teaching

The learning and teaching is delivered through seven one-day face-to-face workshops, each focussing on a particular skill area or theme. These workshops are designed to replicate management training with activities that are student-centred and learner-oriented. They are organised around group exercises designed to be participative with lots of interaction to develop the individual student's skills base.

In addition to the workshops students have to undertake a range of self-managed individual and team-based activities and research that feed directly into the module assessment. The module now has a fully developed set of student and tutor resources, which have been collected, adapted and packaged over the seven years that it has run.

Assessment

The workshops, small group activities and private study tasks are designed to provide many opportunities for tutors, students and their peers to give formative feedback. Module outcomes are summatively assessed through a problem-based 'real-life' business case study, with an individual and team element and a short portfolio that links what students have learnt about their current capabilities, development needs and career aspirations to what they have discovered about employer expectations.

The assessment is designed to allow students to investigate complex real-life questions; identify and collect appropriate evidence and present, analyse and interpret their results. In each element of assessment students are asked to reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of their approach to the tasks. In this way assessment is a tool to encourage and support their learning and provides them with an opportunity to see for themselves how they can improve their performance.

Module Evaluation

The module has now run for seven years with an annual cohort size of 200-400 students. The success rate has been consistently high; the small number of module failures is mainly confined to students who have not participated sufficiently in the workshops or the team project. Student attainment is usually slightly higher than the overall average for the cohort, with performance for individuals in line with, or slightly ahead of, that on their other modules.

Early feedback from both students and the External Examiner led the module leaders to reduce, significantly, the amount of assessment and with each successive offering to refine the assessment tasks, the input and the delivery of the module. Adjustment to the assessment levels has resulted in consistently positive feedback from students, Externals and the teaching team.

- **Students** appreciate the workshop resources and the guidance provided on completing assessment tasks. The day-long workshops are tiring for some, but this is alleviated by the fact that these run on alternate weeks. Most students say they feel stimulated by the reality of the assessment tasks, and consider that the practical skills they gain in accessing and using real-time information will be useful elsewhere in their studies and in future employment.
- Team working, predictably, gets more mixed feedback. Many students value the opportunity to work with a diverse range of individuals (teams are not self-selecting); most feel that the learning experience will pay dividends in the future. A small number of interpersonal difficulties arise each year, and the students affected may feel this has a negative impact on their learning and their attainment.
- **External Examiners** have commented on the impressive quality of the work produced by many students. They have also commented positively on the relevance and utility of the module for students, the clarity of assessment material and the quality of the learning resources.
- **Tutors** generally find the module interesting to deliver and the resources supportive and useful in guiding, but not constraining, the students' learning. The creativity and standard of work produced by students often impress them. The module leaders ensure that there are opportunities across the semester for tutors to meet and share experiences, and function as a team themselves, which again the tutor team has appreciated. Along with the workshop resources and clear assessment criteria this is one way of ensuring a reasonable level of consistency in the student learning experience. It also models appropriate team behaviours to the students – who do note them!
- The content and learning approach on the module make it possible for tutors from any sub-discipline within Business to be part of the teaching team. In practice the module leaders and most of the tutors come from the HRM Department. We have also had tutors from Strategy, Marketing, Finance, Information Systems and even Languages as part of the team over the years, all of whom have contributed to and gained from the richness of the experience.

Life Career Development

Life Career Development had an altogether different genesis.

Module Development

This unit was designed in 2000 as a Level 3 option for a Combined Honours Field in HRM, that could also be taken by students on the Business degree. As such, it is firmly rooted in the undergraduate Human Resources curriculum, sitting alongside other generalist and specialist HR modules.

The common link between this and Management Skills is that one of the module leaders developed both modules. Personal and professional learning from developing Management Skills was brought into the design and development of Life Career Development. Inquiry-guided learning, the team-based approach to delivery, the workshop format (although in this case a half, rather than a full, day), and the early development of a set of learning resources for each session, are all replicated in this module.

The guiding principle in developing the module was to put the learner at the centre of this experience. We tried to see life and career development theory through the eyes of the individual student: to help them understand how and why s/he became the person they are, and to discover what this tells us about ourselves, others and the world we live in. Of particular interest to HRM students, the way in which the module has developed makes it suitable for students from any discipline to take as an option. The student needs to be prepared to examine and engage with their life journey and their future aspirations in a way that is personally developmental and has critical and academic rigour.

The module provides a theoretical framework in which to discuss the process of career management and development. It considers this process in the context of individual development, the work situation and the wider social environment. Learners are required to be able to apply career theory to analyse the development of others' careers and the planning of their own. They engage with current changes in work patterns and the impact on careers and individuals' career development.

Aims

The aims of this unit are both academic and practical: throughout the unit and assessment learners are asked to reflect on the implications of career theories and concepts for organisations and the individuals within them. The unit sees career planning as a means of systematically preparing the learners for their next career transition from student to full-time employee. It therefore also allows the learner to plan and critically reflect on their personal career plan.

Outcomes

The module develops students' skills in analysis, critical thinking, problem solving and task management. It develops their communication skills – written and oral – as well as explicitly engaging them in understanding their own learning process. Specifically the outcomes for the module state that on completion of this module learners will be able to:

- explain some of the meanings work has for different individuals;
- identify the major factors that affect occupational choice and career development;
- explain the concepts of occupational choice and career development;
- assess the implications of career theory for the management of careers in the context of current organisational practices;

- critique the relevance of theoretical approaches to career development;
- apply career planning techniques to facilitate their own and others career development; and
- critically reflect on their personal development needs.

Learning and teaching

Based on Lee's inquiry-guided learning approach (2003) the module offers the opportunity for individuals to decide which aspects of career management they particularly want to explore, as they develop their ability to evaluate and apply theory in practice. To a large extent the learners determine individually which aspects of the syllabus are most interesting and relevant for them: in the light of both their individual circumstances and aspirations in relation to the Personal Career Plan and their chosen subject for the Career Development Interview and Report.

The tutors' primary role is to introduce the broad area of contemporary Career Management: the theoretical concepts, models and issues. They also develop the learners' ability to analyse, challenge, evaluate and apply these skills, both in class-based activities and completion of assessments: they help students frame and find answers to 'good' questions. Two tutors team teach each session. Formats vary, but each session has no more than thirty minutes continuous tutor-led input – in some self-discovery sessions after a 10-15 minute briefing, the learning activity becomes entirely student directed, with learners working in triads and tutors moving around as a resource.

Assessment

Formative assessment takes place throughout the unit via exercises and progress reports in class on which there is tutor, self and peer feedback. Summative assessment consists of two elements: the first is a Personal Career Plan with self-analysis of previous experience, current employability skills, personal interests, values and aspirations, as well as research into future career opportunities. The other element of assessment is a Career Development Interview & Report that requires learners to identify, interview and write a report on the life career development of an individual of their choice. This incorporates pre-interview research and preparation, a record of the interview and a post-interview report giving an analysis of the subject's career choices using appropriate models, theories and knowledge of Career Management.

Module Evaluation

Life Career Development has run for five years with seven cohorts of students, full-time and part-time: cohort size has grown from 25 to 65 for the current intake. Overall the experience has been a very positive one for both students and staff: the quality of much of the work produced has been outstanding, and most students achieve marks ahead of their overall average.

Issues have been raised about the scalability of the module, especially this year. Experience has shown that the maximum staff/student ratio should be 1:20. The first assignment has proved difficult for students in every cohort. They have been able to rise to the challenge, however, and produce thoughtful, reflective pieces that have practical value for them. We always return this work, with feedback designed to help them develop their second, major piece of work.

Most students are able to use this as a learning experience and produce work of an even better standard for the second assignment. Feedback from students, Externals

and the experience of the teaching team has been used to refine the delivery and assessment of the module.

- **Student** evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive, with individuals finding their learning enlightening and practical. There is, however, one (but never more than one, regardless of cohort size) who rails vociferously against 'a lack of theory' and finds the delivery style and content 'inappropriate on a university course' and without any merit. Fortunately, this is counterbalanced by the majority who find it stimulating, challenging, and often one of the most interesting modules they study on their programme. At each offering there are students who report that their learning on this module has 'changed the way they see themselves and the world', an experience that resonates with the notion of threshold concepts developed by Meyer and Land (2003)
- **External Examiner** feedback initially concerned the balance of practice and theory, given that this is a Level 3 module. After the first offering, more theoretical resources were provided by the development of a set of journal readings to supplement the recommended texts and an additional task requiring an evaluation of the theoretical content was introduced into the first coursework. Since this adjustment was made, the feedback from the External has been exceptionally positive, citing the challenging and innovative assessment method, the quality of work produced by students, and the high quality and sensitivity of the feedback provided by tutors.
- **Tutors** find it challenging to maintain the balance between the academic content and demands of the developmental aspects of the module. It is particularly challenging to provide feedback and a grade for the first assignment: this needs to focus on the process and depth of reflection without appearing to be judgemental of, or insensitive to, the individual learner. We have considered making this purely formative but students say that without a grade they doubt they would take it seriously enough. Overwhelmingly they say that it is completing this work for themselves that enables them to understand the relevance of the underpinning theory in writing up their subjects' life and career choices.

Ethical issues are important in the design and delivery of such a module. Tutors need to provide guidance to students who are prompted, perhaps, to engage with aspects of their experience that they have been avoiding or unaware of. Whilst every effort is made from the outset to ensure that students are clear that this module is concerned with academic study, and not a form of career counselling, the boundaries can become fuzzy. Experience has taught us that we need to be very clear about mutual expectations and assumptions of tutors and students: at the very beginning of the module we share evaluations from past students as well as agreeing a set of ground rules with each new cohort. Despite this challenge, teaching – or rather facilitating – this module has been a privilege and has proved a shared learning experience between tutor and student.

Discussion

Early discussions of employability concentrate heavily on students' acquisition of transferable skills. Since 2000, the discussion around skills has been subsumed into the wider arenas of employability, Personal Development Planning (PDP) and life-long learning. The shift has been helpful in moving from a tick box competence model of discrete skills (e.g. Edexcel's Common Skills framework) to a far more holistic model, such as the 'USEM' model of employability (Yorke 2004) that recognises the possibility of differing levels and continuous development for both learning and future employment. This shift has helped in moving the discussion at

LSBU away from a predominantly 'deficit' model of what skills students lack, particularly on entry.

The focus now is increasingly on personal and learning development, offering an opportunity for students to enhance their achievement throughout their programme of study and beyond. It is something that fits much more easily within HE and begins to break down the 'ghetto' that designates skills as an area that is different and remedial. By broadening the scope of employability, consideration is given to ongoing skills development, alongside knowledge and understanding, *within* the curriculum

To mainstream the importance of employability, however, it is necessary to demonstrate that this area of curriculum development and practice is underpinned by sound education theory. Why? "...because without [theory], education is just hit and miss;...we risk misunderstanding not only the nature of our pedagogy but the epistemic foundations of our discipline" (Webb, 1996:23). "Theory allows us to engage in scholarship; to solve problems in our practice in a focussed and logical manner; to share the insights from reflection and peer review through a common language; and to justify, promote and explain our practice to colleagues, managers and other stakeholders" (Carlile & Jordan, 2005).

Learning and teaching philosophy

Lewin (1943) asserted that there is 'nothing as practical as a good theory'. Consciously or unconsciously, our theories of learning have developed and refined through our own years of study, discussion, debate and reflection on our practice. Writing this story has provided a useful opportunity to stand back and see whether my views on what constitutes a good learning experience are coherent. It gives a reflection point to test the congruence, or otherwise, between my conceptions of 'learning', 'teaching' and my practice.

Perry (1970) identified a hierarchy of knowledge that describes the progressive development of a student's thinking through higher education. This developmental trend involves moving from a simple belief that knowledge is finite and there are 'right' and 'wrong' answers; through the acknowledgement of many relative answers, that can be justified by evidence; to commitment to a reasoned interpretation that fits with the individual's values and ethics. At its highest level, which he termed Stage 9, knowledge is the evolution of awareness, expressed as levels of consciousness, in which the individual breaks through to new perspectives and discards those no longer useful. At this stage, students as learners are able to transform information and ideas and to engage in deep, rather than surface learning (Entwistle, 2000), thereby making sense of the world and developing as a person, the condition that is necessary for Yorke's 'meta-cognition'.

How do we facilitate this learning journey for our students? By taking a constructivist approach that assumes that students are capable of finding, and want to understand, meaning in situations and experiences. As teachers we cannot be in charge of our students' learning: we must accept their autonomy, allow for their diversity and work with their experience. This does not mean abandoning them!

Our purpose in designing these learning activities and assessment is to facilitate, prompt and guide their journey. There is a limit to what the student can learn unaided, and there is a limit to the resources we can devote to them as teachers. We can encourage, and provide prompts and material to move them on. We can design in opportunities for collaborative work and peer-tutoring. We must approach material from the learner's perspective, helping them to build on what is already known and providing a scaffold to support and help them to a higher level. This is often a

challenge when so much of the curriculum is reduced to the content of interchangeable and self-contained modules.

Conclusion

This case sets out to tell the story of how our approach to embedding employability in the Business curriculum has evolved. It would be wonderful to say that it came about through some grand design, however this would be less than truthful! The author hopes that colleagues elsewhere will find it helpful to share our experiences and would welcome feedback.

The debate about employability and the essential characteristics of the LSBU graduate continues through the development of a further iteration of our Learning and Teaching Strategy; the implementation of initiatives aimed at embedding employability across the whole of LSBU's curriculum (that have arisen from a Change Academy Project in 2004), and the mapping of PDP across all current and future programmes.

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