

‘Alumni feedback on employability skills development – responding through innovative pedagogy to embed employability within the curriculum’

Briefing Paper by: David Laughton, Jeff Waldo, Nick Nunnington, Sheffield Hallam University (October 2010)

Overview

This seminar, from the Employability CETL (e3i), reported the results of research undertaken and carried out with recent alumni at Sheffield Hallam University on students' perceptions of their employability skills development.

1. Abstract: please provide a brief abstract of the seminar delivered (maximum 200 words).

The Employability CETL (e3i) at Sheffield Hallam has been interested in obtaining feedback from our alumni on the extent to which their courses have prepared them for the world of work, particularly in relation to their employability skills. In this seminar we reported the results of research undertaken by e3i (survey plus interviews) and carried out with our recent alumni which focused on their perceptions of their employability skills development whilst at SHU. This was followed by two case studies of particular courses at SHU (in real estate and mathematics) which have responded to the challenge of embedding employability skills in the curriculum via innovative pedagogy. The first case study, The European Challenge, makes use of an intensive project week across several European locations, involving employers and a focus on some of the more difficult employability skills to develop in a university context – emotional intelligence and inter-cultural sensitivity; findings from an innovative approach to evaluation will also be shared at the seminar. The second case study involves the use of a bespoke e-portfolio to support employability skills development via PDP, resulting in the highest NSS scores in the associated question in this subject area.

2. Rationale: please provide the background context, such as the research/evidence-informed practice context, which provided the impetus for the seminar.

The rationale for the research with alumni was to provide reflective findings on the extent to which their courses had prepared them for employment in the labour market, and whether or not there had been any gaps in this aspect. This is an under-researched area and provides an additional ‘voice’ in the ongoing debate about graduate employment in the UK. There are clear implications for HEIs emanating from the findings of the research with alumni, and the two case studies that were presented sought to demonstrate how HEIs can respond to the challenge to embed employability (as illustrated by the alumni research) and prepare graduates for the world of work via innovative pedagogy.

3. Generation of evidence: please describe how the reported research/evaluation findings were generated e.g. methods used



- 1 The research with alumni was undertaken using a survey instrument and follow-up structured interviews with a number of participants.
- 2 The research undertaken with Maths students with respect to their PDP experience used student comments which formed part of PDP logs and descriptive statistics of their engagement with the electronic PDP tool.
- 3 The research undertaken with Real Estate students used qualitative analysis of feedback from students who had participated in the intensive study week, and participant observation.

4. Existing evidence: please provide details of research/evaluation evidence drawn on and reported in the seminar

The alumni research drew upon previous research in this area conducted by Elias and Purcell and HECSU (2004) ("Seven Years On: Graduate Careers in a Changing Labour Market", HECSU) which focused on alumni feedback on their experiences of early employment after graduation. A selective bibliography that informed the research and was drawn upon is below:

- Babbie, E. 1990, *Survey Research Methods*, 2nd edn, Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Creswell, J. 2007, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd edn, Sage Publications.
- Dacre Pool, L. & Sewell, P. 2007, "The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability", *Education and Training*, vol. 49, no. 4, pp. 277-289
- de Vaus, D. 2002, *Analysing Social Science Data*, Sage Publications.
- Harvey, L. 2001, "Defining and Measuring Employability", *Quality in Higher Education*, vol. 7, no. 2.
- Hind, D. & Moss, S. 2005, *Employability skills*, Business Education, Sunderland.
- Kumar, A. 2007, *Personal, Academic & Career Development in Higher Education: SOARing to success*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Moreland, N. 2006, *Entrepreneurship and higher education: an employability perspective: Learning and Employability Series 1*, The Higher Education Academy, Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team.
- Watts, A.G., Law, B., Killeen, J., Kidd, J. & Hawthorn, R. 1996, *Rethinking careers education and guidance: theory, policy and practice*, Routledge.



- Yorke, M. & Knight, P. 2006, *Embedding employability into the curriculum*, The Higher Education Academy.

The PDP case drew upon research into employability skills, PDP and electronic portfolios, and placed this in the context of recent discussions about the role of PDP:

- BIS (2009) "Higher Ambitions". Department for Business Innovation and Skills.
- Waldock, J. (2009) "PDP in BSc Mathematics at SHU, e3i CETL Case Study", <http://employability.shu.ac.uk/casestudies/JeffWaldock.pdf>
- "Developing a Progress File for HE: Summary Report of the Consultation Exercise", <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/archive/summary/default.asp>
- Burgess Report (2007) "Beyond the Honours Degree Classification", http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PUBlications/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf
- National Student Forum, Annual Report 2009.

The Real Estate case study drew upon background research which included:

Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning (CEEBl) (2008) "What is Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL)?" <http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/ceeb/eb/>

Jawah, C. (2002) "Using Communication and Information Technologies to Support PBL", http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id449_using_it_to_support_problem-based_learning.pdf

Lantos, G. (1997) "Motivating Students: the Attitude of the Professor", *Marketing Education Review*, 7 (2), 27-38.

Little, D. (1991) "Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems", Dublin; Authentik.

McKenzie, M.D. (2000) "How are the Adventure Education Program Outcomes Achieved? A Review of the Literature", *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 5 (1), 19-28.

Quinn, J., Anderson P. and Finkelstein, S. (1996) "Managing Professional Intellect: Making the Most of the Best", *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1996, 71-80.

Sass, E.J. (1989) "Motivation in the College Classroom: What Students Tell Us", *Teaching of Psychology*, 16 (2), 86-88.

Full details of research evidence drawn upon and reported in the seminar can be accessed via the seminar resources held at:

<http://employability.shu.ac.uk/hea.html>



5. Research findings/new evidence: please describe any new findings or evidence reported in the seminar.

Alumni research:

1 Participants felt that eleven of the nineteen employability skills and attributes surveyed could be learnt equally well in either environment. Only two skills were identified as being best learnt in a work environment: these were **adaptability/flexibility** and **managing others**.

2 The following skills were perceived to be best learnt in an academic environment: **lifelong learning; written communication skills; numeracy; taking responsibility for your learning; presentation skills; and information gathering skills**.

3 Skills/attributes which graduates would have benefited from more guidance on at university:

Top 5 responses: **managing others** 50%, **using new technologies** 35.7%; **presentation skills** 32.7%; **oral communication skills** 27.4%; **decision-making** 25.6%.

4 The aspect of Career Management Skills (CMS) which most respondents would have liked more assistance in was "**identifying opportunities in the graduate job market**"; 100 respondents (or 60%) selected this. The second most frequently selected option was "**researching careers and employers**" with 95 respondents (or 57%) identifying this. 93 respondents selected "**understanding what employers want from interviews**" and 92 identified "**understanding different routes into employment**".

5 Graduates responded positively regarding the skills required for a job, with 116 respondents (69%) stating they felt quite or fully prepared. A considerably larger proportion of alumni felt prepared in the skills required for a job than felt unprepared.

PDP Research:

The investigation evaluated how students interacted with their e-portfolio and supporting process to support their learning and develop employability skills. Key findings were:

1 The benefits of the tool/process (in rank order): planning and meeting deadlines, being organised; assessing understanding and reflecting upon it; receiving replies from and communicating with lecturers; recording work done; gaining a view of progression over the year; expressing feelings.

2 The problems experienced (in rank order): Adding to/using the portfolio every week is too much - may be nothing to write about; lack of feedback, all tutors should read comments; too time consuming, tedious; forget to fill it in; not relevant for me, unnecessary; shouldn't



be compulsory.

3 There was evidence from students that the e-portfolio and supporting process had helped to meet the key objectives of:

- providing the opportunity to develop general skill and of time management and organisation;
- providing the opportunity to develop communication skills, write coherently and communicate the results clearly;
- Provide opportunities to work with a degree of independence and the ability to learn independently.

4 Additional perceived benefits included enhanced and good quality staff-student communication; reflective practice; quick feedback/responses to problems.

The European Challenge Research:

The European Challenge provides an intensive, authentic experience for undergraduate students from related degree courses (e.g. real estate, property etc.) by setting them an intensive, time constrained (two weeks), professional assignment in a location outside of the university. Inter-professional, international student groups work together as consultants for a fictional global finance company seeking to establish a new European Headquarters. The aim is to develop employability skills and attributes via a distinctive pedagogy, the key characteristics of which were found to be:

- **Pressure** - time pressure due to nature and number of tasks to be completed, the group nature of tasks, and the psychological pressure of having to make a final presentation to outside clients.
- **Intensity** - students experienced the process as a real world activity rather than a simulation; the learning by doing aspect added to the feeling of intensity; the demanding approach adopted by the facilitators also contributed to the intensity of the experience.
- **Comfort Zone** - students were taken out of their comfort zone - to a foreign location, in which they had to operate, within a multi-task and group operating environment, and due to the competitive element between the different task groups.

Intellectual Stretch - due to the multi-dimensional, information rich and complex nature of the tasks that groups were allocated.



6. Outcomes of research /evaluation evidence and the implications for policy and practice: please identify any application or outcomes of research/evaluation evidence and detail the implications for policy and practice for different stakeholder groups such as: academics, learning technology practitioners, professional developers, senior managers, policy makers, students, sector organisations, employers and professional bodies.

Alumni Research:

The research outcomes suggest that it is feasible for HE establishments to support the development of the majority of employability skills that are valued and of use in the workplace. Having said this, there is evidence that skills sometimes have different meanings and definitions in the workplace compared to a university environment, and that there is a need to 'sensitise' understandings and definitions by programme designers when employability skills are being embedded within curricula. This implies the need for a higher quality and enhanced dialogue between universities and employers on the nature and essence of particular skills and attributes.

Respondents suggested that more emphasis could be placed on developing the skills of managing others, using new technologies, communication and decision-making within courses, as these were deemed to be of particular value within the workplace. This has implications for curriculum designers and teaching teams, and the relative emphasis placed upon different skills within a programme.

Placement and work-based learning were perceived as powerful ways in which to develop employability skills when they formed part of the design of a programme. An expansion of these modes of learning would clearly be beneficial in this context. This has implications for both universities (building links with employers, devising flexible modes of WBL, developing capability to support and assess WBL) and employers (developing links with universities, creating WBL opportunities, supporting students in the workplace).

Career management skills and support for career development was perceived as an area where universities could offer and provide more to their students. The challenge to universities is to assess whether their existing models of careers guidance and support can be scaled up to meet this demand, or devise additional models (e.g. embedding career management skills within the core curriculum) to respond to this identified need.

PDP Research:

The implications of the PDP research and findings are as follows:

- PDP needs to be embedded and part of core academic activity.
- It needs, as a student activity, to be carried out regularly.
- The benefits and purpose of PDP and any supporting processes need to be explained to learners and continually reinforced.



- The process of PDP is more important than the bureaucracy;
- All staff need to be engaged with the process, even if this involves making clear linkages and associations between their modules and the PDP process.
- Student feedback needs to be collected and used, and students need to be aware that this has taken place to enhance the credibility and utility of the process.
- The PDP process needs an overall champion.
- It should gain academic credit to reinforce the importance and status

European Challenge Research:

The analysis of the student experience on the European Challenge indicates that highly successful enquiry and problem based learning is dependent on satisfying a number of key variables: devising an appropriate level of challenge; formulating the appropriate level of support for learners; facilitating progressive autonomy; encouraging a high level of motivation (defined as the product of realism, relevance, enthusiasm and personality of the tutor, and the manageability of the task). These need to be developed via significant initial upfront investment, and then iterative refinement as the learning experience is repeated with subsequent cohorts of students. This has implications for the professional practice of tutors, staff development, resource allocation within faculties, and the commitment of senior managers to supporting innovative teaching and learning practice within their institutions.

7. Emerging themes: please detail the discussion topics or themes that were raised by delegates during the course of the seminar - suggesting areas that would merit further investigation.

There was only time to discuss the alumni research in any detail at the seminar. Participants discussed the need to embrace the notion of 'authentic learning' in both curriculum design and learning, teaching and assessment methods, as a guiding approach to embedding employability and preparing learners for the world of work. It was recognised that the curriculum was often structured on disciplinary lines, and the task was therefore to convince colleagues that authentic learning approaches would not compromise what they were attempting to achieve in terms of discipline-based outcomes, but rather it was possible to create a fusion between these two approaches that would be of value to learners. There was discussion of the research on what employers are seeking from graduates in the early stage of their careers. Carl Gileard has stylised this as 'oomph and nouse' and it was accepted that it was important to deconstruct these notions and communicate them to students in the context of their personal development activities e.g. PDP. Indeed it was suggested that even more energy and effort needed to be focused on PDP across the sector as a whole, given the role it plays as a key process in developing learner employability skills. It was suggested, in particular, that learners needed more support and guidance in relation to interpreting evidence to produce summary judgements and learning outcomes/achievements and on transferring skills gained to different contexts/sectors, so that these can be presented to employers in a terms they are familiar



with. With respect to employers, it was suggested that there needed to be more employer involvement in the delivery of the curriculum, not just in terms of providing work-based learning opportunities, but also in delivering lectures and seminars as part of the module schemes, so as to convince learners of the appropriateness and relevance of what they are learning, and to provide an employer/organisational insight into the topics being studied. This started a discussion of the importance of the learning task, its design and how it is supported. The same learning outcome can often be achieved via a range of learning tasks, and there was therefore an opportunity for tutors to design their learning tasks so that they included opportunities to develop employability related skills and attributes as well as any subject based knowledge that was deemed important. In this way there is no 'trade-off' between subject and employability skills. More case studies across the sector demonstrating this approach would be a useful aid to encouraging colleagues to follow this line of development in their teaching and learning.

8. Any other comments: please use this box to include any additional details.

Two booklets were produced for the seminar, and these can be accessed via the 'resources' tab in:

<http://employability.shu.ac.uk/hea.html>

9. Bibliography/references (preferably annotated): please list any references mentioned in or associated with the seminar topic. Where possible, please annotate the list to enable readers to identify the most relevant materials.

See 6 above and full references in the supporting papers which can be downloaded at: <http://employability.shu.ac.uk/hea.html>

