Strategic Excellence Initiative executive summary

Southampton Solent University
A Unique Empirical Approach to Embedding Employability in the Curriculum – developing an “Employability in the Curriculum” dashboard.

Introduction and overall description
Southampton Solent University (SSU) has pursued a strategy of embedding employability in the curriculum. Work in this area resulted in the development of an employability self-evaluation test. The (ESE) test is a self-evaluating tool which upon completion gives student participants a graph showing how they rated themselves in the different forms of employability capital shown in the Solent Capital Compass Model. Furthermore, when the data is collated at course level it can reveal where students from an entire course group are more or less confident in terms of employability capital.

In order to build on this the project aimed to draw together the resources and other information available to produce a course level dashboard that could be used by Course Leaders and academic colleagues to view course level employability data from multiple sources. This aimed to inform their planning and course development to further enhance the curriculum in terms of embedding employability.

Project Objectives
There were three key project objectives:

- To create a pilot version of the employability dashboard and populate it with real data for a selected number of courses.
- To beta-test the dashboard with a cohort of course leaders
- To disseminate the project internally in order to gain wider institutional buy-in.

Outputs and implementation
In order to ensure that the dashboard was developed in a format that would integrate with existing University systems the Tableau BI platform was used. This allowed data to be drawn from the University’s data warehouse as well as imported to produce the particular reports. It was agreed that four elements would be drawn together as part of the project in order to present information in an accessible form. The dashboard approach meant that other sources could be added or substituted at a roll out stage or in response to feedback.

DLHE data had already been analysed and broken down to course level as part of business as usual activity. In consequence the obtaining of the data to populate this first element of the dashboard was readily completed.

The prior development of the ESE test meant that the Employability and Enterprise team were working with course leaders to administer the ESE test for courses as part of their planned work programme. The timetable was reviewed and, as necessary, adjusted to ensure that the pilot courses were appropriately scheduled within this cycle to provide the second of the four data elements.

A similar process was followed with regard to the third element. The Employability and Enterprise team were working with course leaders to identify and map the ways in which employability skills were embedded in to the curriculum. The pilot courses were scheduled for this activity where it had not already been undertaken.

In the original project brief the fourth element was set out as follows: “Develop a repeatable qualitative/quantitative method of identifying industrial requirements within curriculum development”. In meetings with the course leaders it became apparent that whilst a questionnaire / survey sent to employers would provide data they expected to find valuable it was not possible to develop a ‘one size fits all’ skills profile for use in the industry surveys. This was because Directors of Schools had selected courses with a broad skills profile for the project and the varied skills profiles needed to be reflected in the questionnaire to
be sent to employers in the different fields. This would also be a factor in a wider roll out to reflect the diversity of the University portfolio. As a result, a template was developed allowing the course leaders to customise certain questions to reflect the skills profile of their particular discipline. The consequence of this is that input, albeit a small amount, will be needed from Course Leaders ahead of the industry survey for each course involved in a wider roll out.

Outcomes
The responses to the industry surveys were varied across the project. The survey was sent out to the established Employability and Enterprise database of employer contacts in each field, supplemented with contributions and industry contacts from the Course Leaders. Use of sector resources regarding skills profiles for various industries were considered as an alternative means of enhancing data for any areas with low return rates.

The drawing together of the various elements was accomplished. The work with the Course Leaders helped to refine the approaches and identify other sources of data / information that they would like to be able to view in conjunction with the sources used. In particular there have been requests for student survey data, both in the form of National Student Survey (NSS) results and internal results from the Student Unit Evaluation (SUE) surveys. Moving forward these suggestions need to be balanced against the need to ensure the legibility of the dashboard and the need to ensure that the information is presented in a way that is not overwhelming to a new user of the tool.

The initial beta-testing was completed but this process could not however be described as fully completed as it became clear that the full impact of the project will take an extended period of time to assess. (At least one full academic cycle). In order to assess the full utility of the dashboard it is necessary to understand whether the information causes Course Leaders to amend their curriculum and their delivery as a result of their insight into the differences between the various elements of the dashboard. The impact on the student experience will only be visible in a measurable format at the end of an academic cycle subsequent to any changes when updated data, such as the results of the course ESE test and updated DLHE information will allow comparative analysis to be carried out.

The project was disseminated within the University through reporting to the Student Experience Committee and will be further disseminated at the June Solent Learning and Teaching Conference.

Likely longer term impact
Whilst the project has had a relatively limited impact over the life of the initial project period it has high potential to develop into making a significant impact as it is embedded. Over the next academic year the project will be piloted and refined with additional course teams – using courses that are approaching revalidation to add further value to the planning process.

Summary
The Strategic Excellence Initiative project has been successful in building upon strong foundations to further embed employability within the curriculum. The partnership working between academics and employability and enterprise professionals has been crucial in order to secure successful outcomes. Incentivising involvement by planning the roll out to provide the dashboard ahead of course revalidation schedules has ensured buy in.

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