Impact case study: 
Developing students’ employability skills and cultural awareness

HEA collaboration with the University of Leeds

The HEA, in partnership with the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) collaborated on twenty ‘Connections’ pilot projects in 2012, on the theme of internationalisation of learning and teaching.

Debbie Powell, Senior Careers Consultant (International Students) at the University of Leeds Career Centre, received support from the HEA for her ‘International Employability Skills Cascade’ project.

This project explored the barriers that Chinese students face when competing for graduate-level jobs at assessment centres. Recent changes to visa regulations mean that securing a graduate-level job paying over £20,000 is the only way for them to stay and work in the UK.

In her role as Careers Consultant, Debbie works closely with students on the frontline drop-in service, meeting students one-to-one to offer information, advice and guidance. She also teaches on Careers Centre modules, and realised that many Chinese students struggled with group work in assessments because of cultural differences. These concerns were also raised by the students themselves during focus groups.

In Debbie’s experience, “they’re used to being taught, sitting in rows, not challenging the teacher,” she explained. “They just soak in what the teacher says and work from a textbook. They weren’t used to challenging the opinion of others.”

The original aim of the project was to recruit a team of UK students who were studying Modern Chinese to act as coaches and mentors to the Chinese students. However, British students from several degree disciplines volunteered because they were interested in gaining cultural awareness and an ‘internationalisation’ experience. Both groups were keen to cascade skills and knowledge gained to their peers, enabling the project to develop into a ‘Train the Students as Trainers’ series of events.

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Case study continued overleaf
The project has proved a great success with both the Chinese and British students saying they had gained confidence and new skills.

“The response I've had from the students has been great,” Debbie said. “The students from China have reported increased self-confidence, the ability to work in groups, but the students from the UK said they got as much out of it – cultural awareness, learning how to give people positive feedback. It’s been really, really positive.”

Debbie also feels that her own confidence and ability to give information and advice to international students has been “vastly improved” by the project, which is now impacting across the university as academics are keen to try it in their faculties. Debbie praised the HEA for being “really supportive” and said she would love to do a similar project with Indian students.

“It’s been a really positive experience working with the HEA,” she said. “It’s been a real lift. I’m at the stage in my career when I’ve got about 30 years’ experience, and this has been a real boost, it’s rejuvenated me and made me even more enthusiastic.”

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