Introduction

In response to the Welsh Assembly Government’s strategy for higher education, For our Future (Department for Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009), representatives from all major higher education stakeholders agreed to a focused enhancement theme for Wales – Graduates for our Future - built around three major work strands: Learning for employment, Learning in employment and Students as partners. The work strands were officially launched in March 2011 and the three groups set about discussing how they could best capture innovation and practice from the sector. The work strands each produced a collection of case studies published by the Higher Education Academy in April 2012.

The Future Directions work strand ‘Learning for Employment’ has shared information on the many ways in which Welsh institutions are enabling graduates to acquire employability attributes. The work strand received around 70 case studies from across the higher education sector. The notion of employability has been discussed by work strand members and is clearly open to interpretation, but the case studies collected generally conform (Yorke, 2006, p. 8), which states that graduate employability is the achievement of “the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”. This leaflet distils the essential learning that colleagues throughout the higher education sector in Wales have identified. The points are organised to reflect the themes presented in the companion publication ‘Graduates for our Future’ enhancement theme: Learning for Employment available from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Learning_For_Employment.pdf

Authentic learning

Most of the case studies describe placement elements within programmes or collaborative working with employers or professionals. Naturally the case studies focus on the benefits to student participants in terms of raising their awareness of the demands of the workplace, gaining professional experience and developing the skills, self-confidence and autonomy to increase their opportunity to enter employment on graduation. Students themselves speak of acquiring a great appreciation of soft skills (e.g. communication, team-working, planning) and the feeling they become more rounded individuals.

Some of the more subtle lessons learned from the case studies include the following.

1. Taking on a placement or work experience is in words of graduates, daunting and hard work. Careful preparation of students, or by students, to take on a placement is a key factor in making a success of the placement. The preparation includes information gathering relevant to the placement and awareness of the skills and competencies that will be vital to make a success of the placement. Students may also have difficulty in balancing the demands of academic studies and a placement.
2. There may be a need to manage student expectations as some students (e.g. in creative industries or performing arts) may perceive another student(s) placement as being more creative and rewarding.
3. Employers can be frustrated by poorly-prepared students who demand a significant amount of time and support from managers and employees during the placement period. This problem can be addressed by each party having a clear understanding of what they want to get from the placement or work experience schedule.
4. The experience of students who have been on a placement may benefit other students as the placement students take on a supporting and teaching role with their peers.
5. Placement arrangements have proved an effective way for institutions to form strong links with the local community through, for example, activities in schools, community counselling services, or magistrates' courts. The university can derive some very good press if tangible benefits to the community of the placement scheme are identified (e.g. reduction in level of minor re-offending).
6. If funding is available, having a post-holder to manage links with an established placement provider (e.g. a secondary school) is an effective way to deal with issues and problems and to develop further the relationship.
7. Buddy schemes have been successful in ensuring students engage effectively with placement opportunities and the schemes take on different guises (e.g. placement student and mentor from the employer; placement student as mentor to a secondary school student).
8. University staff in setting up placement opportunities or work experience programmes need to be sure that this does not undermine local businesses (e.g. placements affecting local fee structures or employment of professionals).

9. In situations where there is a competitive and selective element to gaining a placement unsuccessful students may still gain considerable benefit from participating in the selection process, if that process itself exposes students to workplace practice.

10. Some institutions offer a gap year from academic studies or year in employment schemes. Students participating in this gain all the benefits listed above for placement students. For these schemes to succeed the institution needs to provide strong support either at departmental level or centrally through, for example, the careers service. Experience suggests that students need plenty of time to assess the advantages of these schemes and it may be expedient to provide briefing on the available schemes at the end of the first year.

11. Research and innovation centres commonly have a focus on knowledge exchange but they can provide, through their business and industry partnerships or R&D projects, work experience opportunities for students.

**Careers awareness and application skills**

The case studies tend to focus on personal development planning (PDP) and employability awards for extra-curricular activities. Outcomes for the case studies follow a similar pattern and a summary is given below.

1. PDP can be a discrete unit in a programme or embedded within a suite of existing modules. Whatever the structure it is apparent that PDP needs to be supported through bespoke tutorial meetings or workshop sessions and that online resources can give valuable support to students. An advantage of online resources is that they can be rapidly upgraded.

2. Assessment of PDP should include a reflective commentary and production of a student CV is more or less universal practice for PDP schemes.

3. Collaborative working between students, academic staff and central services on PDP can lead to further collaborations and help establish a students as partners model in developing services and support.

4. Some creative disciplines have a module that develops the entrepreneurial skills of the student involving the production of a pack that includes a business card, web presence, a show-reel as well as a CV. The packs are reviewed by professionals who provide feedback to the student. The main challenge is finding enough professionals to support the initiative.

5. Employability awards recognise the extra-curricular/co-curricular activities of students in areas such as sport, volunteering, student societies, community service, and campus-based work.

6. The schemes need to be supported by well-managed workshops and online resources and links to a student’s PDP should be established. The schemes may also provide an opportunity for postgraduates to mentor undergraduates.

7. Most of the schemes are in the pilot stage but are proving to be very popular and the biggest challenge will be the upscaling of the schemes. Given the limited resources available it will be helpful to seek sponsorship of the schemes from local businesses and employers.

8. Some awards are linked to the Go Wales initiative and there may be opportunities for students to gain an additional qualification (e.g. City & Guilds level 4).
Developing graduate attributes

The recognition and recording of graduate attributes has become a common feature of the curriculum in many universities. The case studies show how the graduate attributes address the skills and competencies required by employers and some of the key messages from the studies are given below.

1. The assessment of graduate attributes is best achieved through a variety of methods (e.g. portfolios, presentations, group wikis, webpage creation, reflective logs, timed open book assignments).
2. Explicit schemes to develop competencies can be threaded through a degree programme but will require a change of culture for both staff and students. The more amorphous nature of competencies means that students will prioritise on assessments with a summative element and this is a major challenge to getting students to recognize and reflect on the development of competencies. In addition, module evaluation may not be an effective vehicle for assessing the development of competencies.
3. In recent years the medical and health professions have enhanced the assessment methods for evaluating the skills and practice competencies of students. Aspects of these Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OCSE) may be transferable to other discipline areas.
4. Providing opportunities for students to explore some of the lesser known attributes (e.g. emotional intelligence) can lead to synergies between disciplines (e.g. business, health and well-being).
5. At postgraduate level particular approaches and initiatives are required to develop the critical reflection skill that is essential at this level of study.
6. A number of institutions have outreach schemes with local schools (e.g. technocamps, computer clubs, discipline-specific short courses) and these provide a very good opportunity for students to develop a range of skills and competencies as well as enhancing links with the local community.

Developing leadership and enterprise

The case studies describe a variety of approaches to developing leadership and enterprise skills such as preparing business ideas and pitches or addressing business problems and challenges. In some cases there is formal certification of leadership and enterprise skills. Emerging lessons from the studies are given below.

1. Students value, even enjoy (!), the methods used to assess groups presenting business plans or pitches in a simulated competitive environment (e.g. Dragons’ Den/Apprentice style presentations) because of the professional relevance and real-world authenticity.
2. Almost all enterprise and leadership assignments involve group work. This can be difficult for some students and careful briefing and preparation of the groups are required. Some students need to know that real world teamwork commonly involves working with people whom you would not view as friends.
3. Involving local professionals and practitioners in evaluating business plans or pitches is a way of showcasing innovative learning to the business community. This can lead onto collaborative work with local enterprises or students setting up their own businesses. Institutional schemes that provide the opportunity to pitch for incubator funds can facilitate self-employment among graduates.
4. Commonly the group assignments run across a semester or even an academic year and so a continuous or regular approach to providing formative feedback, for example through workshops, is needed.
5. Introducing enterprise schemes into the curriculum is an effective way of promoting interdisciplinary working with teams or groups of students formed from across a range of disciplines. In a pilot stage it may be expedient to focus on cognate disciplines and to provide electronic resources to support a diverse group of students (e.g. mature, part-time, full-time, international).
Expanding professional networks

The case studies illustrate ways in which professional networks can be developed and fostered and linked to student project work, work-based learning assignments or placements. Some general observations of the case studies are given below.

1. Different disciplines have adopted approaches to professional networking appropriate to their character. For example, art and design may use exhibitions or festivals to introduce students to professional networks, nursing and health care disciplines use local health care trusts to provide the professional network, and engineering disciplines may create a consortium of companies to provide placement opportunities.
2. Whatever the approach it is clear that students see considerable benefit in having professionals review their progress. In particular, professional involvement can boost their confidence and improve their employment prospects.
3. The professional networking of students may be achieved through custom-designed modules, as part of a project or placement, or as an event within a programme (e.g. job fair and mock interviews).
4. More ambitious networking schemes (e.g. festivals, company consortia) generally require a financial contribution from the external bodies to be sustainable.
5. In some cases it may be better to have modules preparing students for professional development and networking before the final year so that they can then start to establish themselves within a professional network in their final year.

Resources to support employability

The case studies focus mainly on electronic resources provided by institutions to support employability but also include activities such as employment fairs and field trips. Some key features of the case studies are given below.

1. The online approach provides 24/7 access to resources so can reach a diverse population of students and is seen as more effective than lecture presentations.
2. Electronic resources are seen as supplementing and supporting a range of face-to-face activities delivered by the careers service and staff within academic departments. The resources can be embedded within academic programmes and linked to PDP e-portfolios.
3. Online employability resources can also be delivered to alumni and contribute to an institution’s lifelong learning strategy.
4. External funding from professional bodies may be gained to set up websites and online employability resources but project teams need to look carefully at how the website will be sustained over time.
5. The online resource can be designed to promote networking of students and employers and to facilitate peer mentoring among students on work placements.

The members of the Learning in Employment work strand hope that this leaflet has proved useful. For further reading on current approaches to embedding employability, please see the case study collection by following the link http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Learning_For_Employment.pdf

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About Future Directions

The higher education sector in Wales is committed to delivering the best possible student experience. This means continuously working to improve the quality of students’ learning opportunities. In higher education, this is called ‘quality enhancement’ and it can take place at university, department and course level. Universities and further education colleges who offer higher education in Wales are working together on a quality enhancement programme called ‘Future Directions’.

The Future Directions programme is unique to Wales. Universities, staff, students, further education colleges, and a range of organisations are working together. This approach works in Wales because of its size – it’s small enough to bring together all the key players, but big enough to offer a wide diversity of universities and creative ways of doing things. The programme aims to enhance specific areas of the student learning experience. This includes sharing practice and generating ideas for innovation in learning and teaching.

The Future Directions work is coordinated by the Higher Education Academy and is owned by Wales’ higher education sector. Future Directions takes a thematic approach; working together on a specific area or theme at a time. The themes are chosen by the higher education sector, for the higher education sector.

The current theme is Graduates for Our Future with three work strands: Learning for Employment; Learning in Employment and Students as Partners.

To find out more about Future Directions, please visit: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/wales/future-directions

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