EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

Implementing Bournemouth University’s Employability Strategy in the Subject Areas of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

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Summary
This case study sets out to describe the approach that Bournemouth University has taken in designing and implementing a strategy for enhancing student employability, and outlines the considered approach the institution has taken to developing a list of employability attributes and how these have been directly implemented within the context of the development of an Employability Resource Zone. It goes on to highlight experience within the Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) subject area and how this can be used to enhance teaching, learning and assessment practice that directly impacts on “education for employability” (Knight and Yorke, 2000).

Objectives
This section outlines the position of employability in the university’s teaching and learning strategy, the university’s objectives for employability, and includes the objectives of this case study.

Employability is an explicit part of the current Learning and Teaching (L&T) strategy at Bournemouth University (BU) which aims to:

- Integrate employability skills and their assessment.
- Link this with Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Progress Files (and Bologna Diploma Supplements).

The introduction of PDP is already an established strand of the institutional L&T strategy, but although it remains a separate initiative, supported by its own facilities, PDP is now an integral part of the university’s work in employability. Indeed, at BU employability has become an overarching concept which embraces a raft of strategic initiatives on the teaching and learning agenda, namely:

- Enhancing the First Year Experience
- Internationalisation of the curriculum
- Developing entrepreneurial skills in students
- Embedding global perspectives into all curricula
- PDP

The Employability Strategy (developed in 2004) included the following points:

1. Develop skills, attributes and qualities in our students based on those developed by Knight and Yorke, through the use of the curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment approaches; tutoring and support services.
2. Support the BU L&T Strategy in the introduction of the following
topics into the undergraduate curricula throughout the University, and to contextualise/embed these in the subject teaching where they do not already exist.

- International awareness/global perspectives
- Career management skills
- Accreditation of work-based learning
- Personal development planning/portfolio compilation
- Entrepreneurship and creativity

The objective of this case study is to outline the institutional approach to enhancing the employability of our students and graduates, to explain how this has been achieved across the university, and to outline the findings from initial implementation across the HLST subject area within the School of Services Management.

**Context and Rationale**

This section places the development of the BU initiative in the context of the changing environment of Higher Education (HE) and explains the institutional approach taken.

The 1990s saw a steady stream of publications urging HE to develop employability skills in students to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing workplace. In 1996 the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) said, “Most British people, most educators and most students now believe that it is one of Higher Education’s purposes to prepare students well for working life.”

In response to a growing recognition of the graduate attributes needed by employers, the Dearing Report into Higher Education (1997) emphasised the importance of education for employability, focusing on the development of key skills and the importance of work experience. With the government’s adoption of the recommendations from Dearing, the HE system was being steered to place greater emphasis on the employability of graduates (Jackson, 1999; Knight and Yorke, 2001, 2002a).

In response to the publication of the White Paper (DfES 2003), BU established a Curriculum Think Tank (CTT) in 2004 to formulate a response to the issues it raised for the future of BU. The goal of the group was to articulate a vision for learning at BU in the post-2006 higher education landscape in the context of top-up fees, which increased competition and raised expectations from students and other stakeholders.

In this context it was seen that the concept of employability brought together many of the key issues in a changing environment and by focusing on continually enhancing the employability of students by building on our strengths and established success, we could develop a distinctiveness for the 21st century.

BU’s intention was to use this concept as a fundamental strategic principle around which most of its student-centred activities would be focused in the future. It thus became an umbrella concept for other initiatives which formed part of the government’s agenda for the future of HE.

Strategic task groups were established for five key areas, with employability acting as the hub for these interdependent working groups namely:

- PDP
- Global perspectives
- Internationalisation
- First year experience
- Entrepreneurship

Each reflects different aspects of the skills, knowledge and characteristics contained in the definition of the BU graduate developed by the CTT.

**Characteristics of a BU Graduate**

By 2010 all graduates from Bournemouth University will be highly valued by local, national and international employers. They will be:

- Independent, reflective and ambitious learners
- Secure and confident in their subject knowledge and understanding
- Effective team players
- Adaptable to change
- Good communicators
- Confident in using, analysing and manipulating quantitative information
In line with the work done by Knight and Yorke in the ‘Skills Plus’ project (Knight & Yorke, 2000, 2001, 2002a; Yorke, 2001), the concept of employability takes us beyond the skills agenda to the inclusion of ‘personal qualities’ in recognising that these can have a considerable bearing on a student’s success. We agree with Harvey’s approach (2003) towards defining employability; “emphasis is not so much on employability as something acquired through skills, as on employability as a range of experiences and attributes developed through higher level learning.” In this way it is possible to see both the traditional academic education and key skills as being subsets of employability. Therefore, one of the main contributions that higher education can make to employability is to ensure good learning, and Bournemouth’s objective was to enhance the integration and embedding of employability into the entire student experience, both inside and outside the curriculum.

For implementation, we planned four main headings which covered all aspects of the student experience. These are reflected in the statement by the Enhancement Themes initiative, which asserts that practical implementation and good practice fall under these same headings:

- **Curriculum design**, in ways which promote active, independent learning that is relevant to the world of work thus embedding employability explicitly in the curriculum.
- **The use of PDP processes** which encourage students to reflect on and monitor their learning and development at each stage.
- **The provision of suitable and meaningful work-related experiences and learning.**
- **Student support initiatives** which are co-curricular in nature and led by the appropriate services, e.g. Careers, Learner Support and the Students’ Union.

(Enhancement Themes - http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/defaultpage131cd0BlueSub.aspx?pageID=214)

In developing a definition for employability that was suitable for our institutional philosophy, we needed to recognise that employability is about much more than the acquisition of a first job. It relates to a broader set of attributes that enhance students’ capabilities to operate self-sufficiently in the ever-changing world of work in the 21st century, where job patterns are changing and the concept of a job for life rapidly becomes a thing of the past. Our definition was influenced by Knight and Yorke (2001):

> “A set of achievements, understandings, skills and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen future.”

To produce a workable agenda for implementation, we needed to spell out what we meant by these employability attributes. We drew on the extensive research and well standardised findings of Knight and Yorke as part of the Skills Plus project (op cit). Using the USEM (Understanding of subject matter, Skilful practices, Efficacy beliefs and Metacognition) model their research produced a list of 39 attributes which could serve as a workable checklist for the auditing of current practice and (re)design of curriculum content, teaching, learning and assessment approaches. However, it was felt that this list could be further refined to enable it to be more workable and meaningful in terms of an individual’s development and progression. Thus the attributes were reformulated into a hierarchical structure, suggestive of educational stages which sought to eliminate repetition and demonstrated progression and development, cumulating in capstone graduate employability attributes which subsumed the skills and competencies which underpinned them. (See Appendix 1, Attributes for Employability at BU).
Using this approach, a template for auditing purposes was developed. This asked all undergraduate programme teams to audit their current practice against a summary of these attributes and determine where in their programme, by level, these attributes were taught, developed and/or assessed. The matrix template offered a simple ‘tick box’ approach in order to make the exercise easy for staff to complete. This was further developed by one staff member who converted the matrix into an excel spreadsheet, so that a summary of T, D & As (teaching, development and assessment) was automatically calculated. The function of the form was to encourage the initiation of debate amongst programme teams based on the findings that emerged. (See Appendix 2, Employability Template).

**Description**
This section describes the approach to implementation taken and details the development of the Employability Resource Zone (ERZ).

The employability task group led this initiative and once agreement was gained on proposals, they had to be promulgated to each of the academic schools. Communication to ensure awareness and understanding was achieved through presentations to and discussion with senior management. This was cascaded down through the schools to programme leaders and their teams. These formal communication channels were supported by a programme of staff development workshops.

By the end of the academic year 2004/5, all programme teams, with the emphasis on undergraduates, were asked to undertake the following:

- An audit of employability attributes by unit and level within each programme, using the template provided. To reflect on the findings and identify where gaps lay and where enhancements could be made to teaching and learning practice.
- To commit these to an action plan for the coming year, which would be formally recorded in the Annual Report on Programme Monitoring (ARPM). As progress on action plans is monitored and recorded at each programme committee meeting during the following year, i.e. 2005/6, this would ensure programme teams worked on the development and enhancement of student employability during this academic year.

- The Employability Task Group would audit these reports to achieve an institutional picture which could identify where we have strengths and weaknesses and where further support/action was needed.

- A new set of institutional academic guidelines was produced as a required reference point for all programmes under development, and/or existing programmes coming up for review from 2005 onwards, to ensure that the full range of employability attributes were designed into their curricula and teaching and learning approaches.

The development of a comprehensive Employability Resource Zone (ERZ) was instigated in order to support staff in the development and enhancement of employability in their professional practice. This is envisioned as eventually having both a physical and web-based presence; a student audience and a separate staff audience. However, within the first year, it was decided to develop a web-based resource base for staff. The aim was to have this ready at the beginning of the academic year 2005/6 to directly support the action plan resulting from the auditing and planning process they were expected to undertake from the beginning of the academic year.

**Employability Resource Zone**
In line with the good practice principles outlined above, the focus of activity was to be on:

- Curriculum content and organisation
- Teaching and learning approaches
- Co-curricular activities
- Student support
Appendix 3, Figure 1 demonstrates the design for the proposed website development. Its purpose was visualised as a set of resources to support staff in developing innovative approaches to enhancing the employability attributes of their students and graduates. In addition, it provided a communication channel for important external information from employment organisations, the labour market and related bodies such as the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

This provided an excellent dissemination point for the other strategic task groups whose outputs/purposes directly contributed to graduate employability.

**Populating the Website**
Staff from across the institution were invited to contribute ideas, models and examples from their practice and/or research in the form of case studies, introductions and other resources in areas where they have developed interest, experience and expertise. In addition, selected links to external resources were provided using annotations to help staff easily locate the information we need. Thus the website provided a set of resources which offered examples of good practice, new ideas, case studies and models for all BU staff to draw on, and consequently has become an important vehicle for dissemination of practical ideas.

**The Structure of the Website**
(See Appendix 3)

**Evaluation**
This section analyses and evaluates findings from the implementation process in the School of Services Management.

The HLST programme teams in the school have duly audited their current programmes using the template and reflected on the pattern that emerges in order to identify gaps and discuss opportunities for improvement. Some of the key findings are given here:

**Programme 1**
From the pattern that emerged from the matrix, the team was able to identify the lack of career management skills development in Level C (year 1). Through this analysis they were able to explain why it is often difficult to get the second year (Level I) students to start taking placement preparation seriously from the start and to be able to produce an acceptable CV. As a result of this, immediate plans were put in place for improvements from the start of academic year 2005/6 which involved a small ‘tweaking’ to the content of an appropriate unit in Level C, in order to strengthen the development of career management skills in students at an earlier stage. A creative approach was taken to closer monitoring of the CVs produced by the second years, which imposed higher standards and stricter deadlines. A further finding was that there appeared to be more ‘T’s (teaching) at Level H than at Level C! This prompted the team to further review teaching and learning strategies at these levels.

**Programme 2**
Examples of good practice were identified with groupworking, where the teaching of groupworking skills occurred in Level C and there was a good balance between development and assessment across the programme as a whole. The programme was able to identify a strength across all their pathways on the development and assessment of creativity and innovation and that the teaching aspects were well placed in Level C. However they also identified that opportunities for students to develop adaptability were lacking and that one of their subsequent action plans was to “review opportunities to develop adaptability with particular reference to Level C”.

**Programme 3**
This programme team was able to identify a lack of focus on study skills at Level C (year 1) and discovered that there appeared to be more teaching and assessment of these skills in the other two levels. They also discovered that although there were opportunities for skills of reflection to be developed (D) across the programme and that these were assessed (A) in equal measure, they were never really taught to students. However, they were able to demonstrate good practice with their teaching, learning and assessment practice of communication skills, with the pattern across the levels reflecting a progressive development through the appropriate level of teaching, self development and assessment.
Indeed, by analysing the summary column on the excel spreadsheet the team discovered that there is a tendency to assess (A) employability attributes which are taught (T) or developed (D) disproportionately less. When analysing the summary information across the levels, they discovered as with Programme 1, that there seems to be more actual teaching of employability attributes at Level I, (the second year) than at Level C.

Discussion
Our employability strategy sets out to develop an “education for employability” (Knight and Yorke 2000) that is:

- Coherent and joined up
- Structured and consistent
- Articulated and explicit
- Leading edge and focused

The purpose of the form was to generate an agenda for discussion of enhancing our practice around these principles through programme content, design and organisation.

With reference to the design of the form, the first issue that was encountered was the interpretation of the descriptors on the first iteration of the audit matrix. For example, did all staff understand global awareness to be the same thing? What attributes or competences are implied from being globally aware? Some staff queried why IT skills were not listed separately, whereas when the form was designed, it had been assumed that staff would see IT skills as inherent in areas such as study skills, communication skills, numeracy and information literacy. It soon became obvious that the main descriptors needed to be teased out and the final form was annotated, as in Appendix 2. However, the issue of a common understanding of descriptors and language used when carrying out an audit, in order to minimise interpretation is an important general point.

The exercise also provides an opportunity for teams to cross reference the ticks on the form with their unit specifications and clarify the learning intended through each unit or module. Both of these issues address the issues of explicitness and articulation.

If our programmes are typical, one general finding that the exercise has highlighted is the importance of attending to the content and design of the curriculum at Level C (year 1), and how important well designed learning opportunities are in the first year for establishing the foundation of good employability education. It was the coherence, structure and consistency of the programmes with reference to the development of employability that was sometimes found wanting from the exercise.

The evidence above demonstrates conclusively the potential benefits to be gained from undertaking this exercise, but there is no assurance that all academics will treat the exercise with the same seriousness. Reasons for this are many, of which time pressures are an obvious one. However, we have tried to tie this into the cycle of accountability for the role of Programme Leader and as the ARPMs are audited, the university will be scrutinising the outcomes. Leadership and the ability to manage and co-ordinate the team will be a key requirement for the success of the exercise and for developing employability as a strategic imperative.

BU takes this concept very seriously and staff are generally extremely interested in helping their students to realise their employability potential. As a result there is a sense that we are good at developing our students for employment already and that there is little need for such bureaucratic exercises or the change/enhancement it implies. Therefore there is evidence of complacency amongst staff about this initiative. This may be a common reaction amongst vocational and professional programme based institutions such as ours, and it is important to acknowledge and celebrate achievements to date. However, in a rapidly changing environment it is also important that any pockets of complacency are shaken and stirred out of this state! The principle of being focused and ‘leading edge’ tries to address this issue. However, there is initiative fatigue and with continuing pressure on resources, the key is always to find ways to work with staff. In the academic environment, as a result, implementing new initiatives and reaching objectives takes longer and requires more effort.
We are confident that the building blocks are in place to ensure a focus on employability in the future. We have a baselining exercise in place which is providing institutional benchmarks, and teams will be accountable for measurable progress and development over time towards the achievement of objectives.

It is early days to report on reaction to the ERZ website. The Steering Group members were honest enough to say that it was too institutional in appearance and was not inviting enough. The staff asked why it could not look more like the PDP website, which has been specifically designed to appeal directly to students. In comparison they accuse the Employability website of being boring.

Regardless of how we respond to these comments, the general feeling is that when staff need to plan for change, at the time of programme review or development, or in response to feedback relating to the enhancement of employability or teaching and learning generally, this resource base will provide a ready made set of ideas, examples and case studies for them to draw on.
References and URLs


Enhancement Themes
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/defaultpage131cd0BlueSub.aspx?pageID=214

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