EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

Integrating Employability and Management Skills into the Tourism Curriculum at Leeds Metropolitan University

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Summary

This case study explains how employability skills are integrated into the tourism curriculum at Leeds Metropolitan University. From day one, level 1, semester 1 all undergraduate tourism students start developing their portfolio of employability skills. A new level 1 module has been developed – Employability and Management Skills – to initiate this process. This module includes a variety of innovative assessment, learning and teaching strategies to facilitate the students’ skills development. Micro-teaching is a key component of the learning strategies used with work related management scenarios, providing the focus for a theatre role play exercise. Peer assessment is used in a creative way to provide rapid and immediate feedback to the students on the development of their skills. Employability skills are not just developed at level 1 – they are integrated and embedded into the curriculum at all levels of the course.

Objectives

The purpose of employability and management skills training on undergraduate tourism courses at Leeds Metropolitan University is to:

- Make students aware of the employability skills that employers expect the graduates they recruit from universities to possess.
- Provide structured learning opportunities for tourism students to develop further, and reflect on, their portfolio of employability and management skills.
- Encourage tourism students to transfer the employability and management skills they are developing at university to the world or work.

Rationale

A review of graduate entry level job advertisements in the national press reveals the skills that employers look for when recruiting new employees. These skills include:
There is no consensus of what employability is (Hannam, 2004). Different definitions of employability have been proposed, although the common features of most definitions focus on the ability of an individual to gain and maintain employment (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). There is though, greater agreement of what employability skills are. Hind and Moss (2005:1) define employability skills as “...a set of social behaviours and skills that you can learn to help you interact and work with other people in a variety of different situations”. Skills that are frequently mentioned as being employability skills are; learning and study, oral and written communication, numeracy, career management, group work; problem solving, decision making and critical thinking skills (ibid).

It is apparent that the careers marketplace has changed from being dominated solely by the bright, academically gifted person, to being the domain of the person who has management aptitude, displayed in their employability skills – in addition to intellectual abilities (ibid).

To respond to this change many university courses now include employability skills training and development as part of their curricula. The highly vocational nature of tourism courses at Leeds Metropolitan University reinforces the importance of integrating employability and management skills training into the undergraduate curriculum. This case study explains how this is achieved.

Developing Employability Skills

When conceiving an employability skills development programme it is important to consider the teaching and learning strategies to be used. Developing employability skills is a four stage process:

1) Making students aware and sensitive to the employability skills to be developed

The first step in the process is developing a cognitive awareness with the students of the skills they are to develop, and the constituent elements of those skills. This can be achieved in a number of ways: demonstration, tutor led presentation and discussion, through independent study – for
example text books, see Hind and Moss (2005) - www.employabilityskillsforstudents.co.uk - or by observing, analysing and evaluating the skills used by other people in videos or DVDs.

2) Practice
Once the students are aware of the employability skills to be developed, and what constitutes a competent level of performance, strategies have to be developed whereby the students can apply these skills.

A teaching strategy that is particularly effective for skills development is micro-teaching. Micro-teaching, as the term suggests, involves breaking the class down into smaller sub-groups which are then the focus of attention. In these groups a variety of learning strategies can be implemented which will involve all the group members participating in employability skills development. A frequently used learning strategy for skills development is the use of role play exercises. When the role play is video-recorded constructive feedback can be provided to students on the development of their skills.

3) Feedback on the practice
Just as important as practice is the feedback that the students receive on the strengths of their employability skills and the skills they need to develop further. Feedback is essential and should be provided through peer and self reflection, as well as by the tutor. As mentioned above the recording of a role play exercise can significantly improve the quality of feedback that the students receive, particularly if well-prepared instruments are used for structuring the feedback.

4) Further practice in the light of feedback
To consolidate the progress that has been made so far and to develop further the employability skills of the students, additional practice and feedback is required. This might be within the curriculum being studied but more realistically within a practical work-related setting. Feedback will now probably be through the student’s own self reflection, but supplemented by formal or informal feedback received from a supervisor in the workplace.

When integrating a programme of employability skills development into the curriculum course teams have three options to choose from:

1. Integrate employability skills development into the curricula of a number of modules. Modules that develop academic subject knowledge could have learning outcomes relating to employability skills development.
2. Design a specific module that specifically focuses on the development of employability skills.
3. Utilise both 1 and 2 above.

The approach adopted on undergraduate tourism courses at Leeds Metropolitan University is option 3. It is felt that this approach will maximise the learning that students will gain from a programme of employability skills development.

To determine which employability skills to develop within the ‘employability module’, all the skills it was thought students should develop as part of their course were identified. Then a mapping exercise was undertaken of all tourism modules to identify and establish which employability skills could be most effectively developed within the ‘academic modules’. Each module team took responsibility for developing these skills in addition to the academic subject content of their module. For example, the module entitled ‘Travel Industry’ took responsibility for developing the students’ report writing skills, while ‘Principles of Tourism’ provided
opportunities for students to develop further their oral presentation skills. Part of the assessment for these modules involved students writing reports and making formal presentations.

The employability module - titled Employability and Management Skills was then designed to incorporate a number of high order employability skills that would not be developed fully within the other academic modules. Within the new module time could be devoted to utilising the four stage process identified above. This process would facilitate the students' development of their problem solving, creativity, and management skills, as well as giving opportunities for students to enhance further their learning and study skills, communication skills, group work skills, and career management skills.

The Employability and Management Skills Module

In designing the module three principles were acknowledged:

1. Skills are developed through active participation – thus in this module the students should be as ‘active’ as possible.

2. Students learn through feedback – a number of opportunities should be taken to provide formal feedback to students on the development of their skills.

3. Immediate feedback improves motivation and enhances learning – assessment strategies should be devised that facilitate this.

Employability and Management Skills is a level 1, semester 1 module delivered over a 12 week teaching period. It was felt that the incorporation of the above three principles into the design of the module would create an interesting and stimulating learning experience. In addition, through micro-teaching, students would establish friendships with their peers that would help them adjust to university life contributing to their retention and loyalty to the course. It was designed around four broad themes that reflected the learning outcomes for the module:

- Learning and study skills
- Communication skills
- Career management skills
- Group work skills

However, within the above four themes assessment strategies were devised that enabled the students to develop their:

- Problem solving skills
- Creativity skills
- Leadership and management skills
- Reflective skills

The first assessed exercise occurred in week 4:

CV and Covering Letter

Tourism courses offered at Leeds Metropolitan University include a 48-week industrial placement that takes place in year 2. To help students develop skills in applying for placements (and other employment opportunities) the first theme within the module is career management skills. After receiving guidelines on how to write effective CVs and covering letters the students were required to apply for a ‘mock’ industrial placement. Six advertisements for tourism industrial placements were posted on the Employability and Management Skills WebCT site and students had to apply for one of them with their covering letter and CV.

To provide immediate feedback to the students in week 4 on the success of their CVs and covering letters, peer assessment was used. Each student received a copy of another student’s CV and covering letter and had to
assess them from the perspective of the industrial placement employer (using clearly designed marking criteria). Students were encouraged to write their feedback both on the CV and covering letter as well as on the assessment sheet. However, to develop the students’ skills of providing feedback to others, once the CV and covering letter had been assessed, each student had to provide oral feedback to the person whose CV and covering letter they had assessed.

**Interview Skills**

The assumption was then made that each student had been successful in applying for the industrial placement and had been offered an interview for the job. In week 6 of the semester the interview skills of the students were assessed. Once again instruction was provided on how to be successful in interviews prior to the assessment. Unfortunately, because of the number of students on the course it was not possible to conduct lengthy oral interviews with each student. Instead, two learning and assessment strategies were devised. Firstly, each student had to write answers to questions that are frequently used in job interviews. After writing their answers each student was given another student’s responses and was required to adopt the role of the interviewer and to assess the answers given. Each assessor was asked to provide as much feedback as possible on the answers to the various questions. When this had been completed, the assessor had to explain to the interviewee how he or she rated the responses.

Then each student (in private with their tutor) was asked orally one of the questions posed in writing to give them an opportunity to communicate verbally their answer to the question. At the conclusion to each mini-interview, the tutor provided immediate feedback to the student on his or her response.

This exercise concluded the career management element of the module.

**Theatre Role Play**

After week 6 of the semester, the content of the module progressed to consider group work skills. Instruction was provided for the students on a variety of different elements and aspects of group work before they embarked on a major assessment that would give them the opportunity of developing and practising a number of employability and management skills.

The students were broken into small groups and each group was given a tourism management scenario. Examples of the scenarios are:

1. **Late Check-in**
   Passengers arrive late for a flight check-in and the airline staff have to manage the situation.

2. **Whiteknuckle Shaker**
   Employees at a theme park feel that one of their team members is underperforming. The team members have to resolve this problem.

3. **Club 18-70**
   In error a tour operator books 18-30 guests into a hotel used by more elderly customers. The tour rep has to handle the complaints of both groups of guest.

4. **Campsite Challenge**
   An English family arrives at a foreign campsite on the back of a break down truck – their car has broken down. The campsite manager speaks little English but has to help the family overcome their problem with a local garage owner who speaks no English. This management scenario required the students to communicate in another language - one of the option modules on the tourism courses enables students to develop their foreign language skills.

The briefing notes provided for the students on all the management scenarios were very simple. The
management scenario was outlined and they had to devise the story line and write a script that illustrated how the management challenge could be resolved. Each member of the group had to play a role in the exercise that would be video-recorded.

The exercise took place in week 11. After each group completed their role play they were given the video tape on which their role play had been recorded and were given the opportunity to play back and review their performance using the assessment criteria that the tutor would use to formally assess the role play. This allowed them to overcome in private any embarrassment they might experience about seeing themselves on screen. This facilitated the next stage in the process – feedback.

Tutor feedback and the mark for the assessment was provided to students in week 12. A sensitive approach was adopted to this important part of the developmental process. Short clips from the videos were played back to the class and students were asked to highlight what was particularly impressive about the management scenarios. No comments about specific individuals were made, instead comments were encouraged about behaviours that were in evidence within each role play scenario. Aspects of the scenarios that could have been handled differently were explored, as well as the tutor taking the opportunity to reflect on the approach that each group took to solving the management challenge.

**Learning and Study Skills**

The final assessment for this module took place in week 13, one of the assessment weeks after teaching had finished. The purpose of this assessment was to ensure that students had developed some of the learning and study skills that were considered to be essential for successful study at university.

An assessment day was planned in week 13 that would assess the students’:
- Note-taking skills
- Harvard referencing skills
- Comprehension skills
- Academic writing skills

The assessment day started with a lecture (including a video playback) on a topic relating to one of the academic modules, ‘Principles of Tourism. The students were required to take notes from both the lecture and the video. Following the lecture students were given a question they had to answer, using their lecture notes and notes they had previously taken from academic journals or textbooks. The assessment criteria for this exercise reflected all the skills involved.

**Integrating Employability Skills throughout the Tourism Curriculum**

The Employability and Management Skills module proved to be an effective means of introducing the concept of employability skills development to the students. To reinforce the fact that employability skills are developed over time a number of other teaching and learning strategies are deployed within the tourism curriculum at Leeds Metropolitan University. These are briefly summarised below:

- In semester 2, level 1, students study the module Management in Tourism Organisations.
- Students have the opportunity of gaining practical work experience in year 2 on a 48 week industrial placement.
- During level 2 students continue to reflect on, and develop, their employability skills in the module Personal and Professional Skills for Managers.
• At level 3 students work as tourism consultants to solve work-related problems that are set by real tourism businesses on the module Tourism Consultancy Ventures.

• Students complete progress files and develop personal development plans to support their learning and skills development at each level of their course.

Discussion

An innovative approach has been adopted towards the integration of employability skills into the tourism curriculum at Leeds Metropolitan University. Starting on day one of semester 1, level 1, students study the innovative module Employability and Management Skills. At each subsequent level of the course there are modules that further enhance the students’ portfolio of employability skills. Considerable opportunities are available for the students to transfer their learning at university to the world of work. A key focus of all the assessment, learning and teaching strategies referred to in this case study is that the students have been involved as active learners and peer assessors, frequently through micro-teaching.

So what lessons have been learned?

• Employability skills training needs to be integrated and embedded throughout the curriculum, with clear progression between the skills developed in each module and at each level of the course of study.

• For skills training to work, the students have to have confidence in their tutor. The tutor needs to create an environment where the students do not feel threatened by the learning strategies that are to be employed. Thus, the tutor needs to appreciate, and empathise with the concerns of the students, and filter feedback provided so that it does not have a negative impact on the student.

• When planning a programme of employability skills training it is essential to devise learning situations that simulate as closely as possible scenarios that students will face in their future careers – this will add to the credibility of the programme and help motivate the students.

• Careful consideration has to be given to what is actually going to be assessed in the employability skills training programme, and the means by which the assessment is to take place.

• While students initially find peer assessment daunting, they are actually able to accurately assess the work of their peers. This is achieved by having clearly designed assessment criteria that are explained to students before they assess others’ work. Tutor moderation of a sample of peer assessed work indicated that the students were (on the whole) accurate in their evaluation and marking of the work they were assessing.

• Although learning strategies can be designed that are purely classroom based, the opportunity to use special facilities such as video recording studios helps to encourage greater commitment and professionalism from the students – they rise to the challenge of being recorded.

• Students respond in different ways to the participative nature of employability skills training.
Some students feel threatened by role play exercises and their video-recording. To reduce such anxiety it is essential to stress the benefits of these learning strategies and to be sensitive to their concerns. Some students also find it difficult to watch their own performances on video. The role of the tutor in such circumstances is once again critical, reassuring such students that comments in the feedback session will not be made about individuals, but about how the role play exercise worked as a management scenario.

• The management scenarios used for the theatre role play exercise helped demonstrate to the students the relevance of the Employability and Management Skills module – all management scenarios were based on situations which previous students had encountered on their industrial placements. By providing realistic management scenarios, students should be able to transfer the skills they are developing through this module to actual situations they face when in employment.

• Feedback to students on the development of their employability skills is critical and essential. Students will not always enjoy receiving feedback on the development of their skills, so it has to be offered in a tactful and constructive way, coming from the student, his or her peers, and the tutor. However, at the end of this module the employability and management skills of the students had been developed further – learning had been achieved and the constructive feedback provided to the students was felt to be a key element of the learning process.

• The commitment of the tutor to innovative modes of assessment, learning and teaching is also important. The teaching team selected for the Employability and Management Skills module were felt to be colleagues who would be able to adopt a different style of delivery and assessment. These tutors could then act as catalysts for change to other colleagues demonstrating that innovative modes of teaching and learning are effective.

• Employability skills cannot be developed solely within one module. The Employability and Management Skills module described in this case study is considered to be just one stepping stone in the students’ understanding and awareness of their need to develop a portfolio of employability skills. Integrating employability skills throughout the curriculum, at all levels of the course, is essential for enhancing the skills of the students. This also helps students to appreciate the transferability of the skills they are developing, both to other modules within their course, and hopefully also to practical work related situations.

• The biggest challenge of all in employability skills training is encouraging students to be reflective learners, whereby they reflect on and assess the skills they use in a variety of different work related and social encounters. Progress files and personal development plans provide a structured and formal means of doing this.

• Feedback from students indicate that they enjoy the variety of learning, teaching and assessment strategies used for employability skills training – they
are daunting, challenging, motivating but also add fun to a programme of study.

Conclusion

All university courses need to develop further the employability skills of their students. Developing employability skills does not occur overnight – it is a life-long process. Students do not necessarily find skills development an easy process; it can be just as challenging as developing academic subject knowledge and understanding. To facilitate skills development course teams need to consider a variety of strategies for integrating skills training into the curriculum. The combination of these strategies will result in students developing skills that will enhance their employability.
References and URLs


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