Higher Education - What is it Good for? Knowledge or Employability

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Abstract

This session will look at the course-based support offered to students at a UK university. The university has taken an innovative approach to supporting undergraduate students with their employability from year one through to graduation and beyond. This continuing research aims to disseminate and implement a non-traditional style of delivery into the teaching of employability skills. The driver for this was previous, consistent, feedback from students that traditional skills and employment modules were too broad and generic and they wanting a more personalised approach. The business courses that have adopted this new approach have embedded the concept in all years of study, building up a student’s personal ‘toolkit’ of skills to prepare them for their careers and lives in society. This personalisation process, coupled with a view of transition that covers students’ entire time at university, has had mixed results from both an academic and a student perspective. The link is to the conference topic of pedagogical innovations in Education - Personalised Learning. Whilst the concept of non-traditional delivery is well known in UK HE, the debate of what HEIs should be providing is an interesting area to consider further too.

Keywords: personalised learning, higher education, employability, supporting students.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper has been written to document the process adopted within a higher education Business School at a top performing UK, modern, university for embedding employability within curriculum. A mixture of a holistic approach (which is common in many UK universities) and an innovative, personalised approach has been adopted. The more holistic approach involves embedding employability within all modules. All new modules have to meet set criteria which aim to ensure that what is taught, is relevant to students when they are employed. This embedded approach is reinforced by a dedicated group of advisers who students can access to help them when they are applying for employment.

The second strand to the employability agenda is a personalised approach which is based on an accredited module for each level of study called ‘Continuous Professional Development (CPD)’. These modules allow for a personalised approach for all students. A core set of workshops are offered which allow students to study the basic skills needed within business. Students then reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses from an employability perspective and then can select their own programme of study that allows them to focus on their areas for development. This paper will reflect on the approaches taken, the pedagogical considerations and the feedback from students on the suite of modules. It will also consider the wider purpose of education and how the concept of employability fits in with both the wider purpose, but also the subject specialism element.

Historically student feedback on traditionally delivered skills and employability modules was weaker than subject specialist modules. The feedback was that students didn’t embrace the learning potential as it wasn’t course or subject specific; there was a view that employability or skills modules were less valued by students. Students often didn’t see the benefits of such generic modules relating them to careers modules at school or they felt that the broad brush approach didn’t allow for the unique and individual student journey making the modules unpopular with some students.

This feedback was analysed and the new, personalised approach was adopted for all undergraduate business course in the School. A new suite of CPD modules was created, to focus mainly on supporting the embedding of employability within the course structure. This paper will focus on the pilot and early rollout of the modules and the staff and student feedback to see if the perception of such modules has changed with the more self-directed approach for students.
2 METHODOLOGY

This research project has adopted a case-study approach using staff and students within the CPD modules as the sample. Focus groups, using a purposive sampling technique, were set up to get feedback from students. Whilst this type of sampling is not meant to be representative, it does provide a wide range of opinions about the new approach from a range of different groups. Two focus groups were conducted, one for staff working on, or connected to the CPD suite of modules and the other with a selection of final year students, who had studied the CPD modules in all three stages of their Course. The students were selected to reach a cross section of the cohort from high to lower performing students. This approach meant that a variety of opinions could be sought as it ensured that it was not just the fully engaged students (and staff) who were part of the project.

3 RESULTS

The initial findings centre around two key areas. The first of which relates to the role of HE and how employability fits in with this overall purpose. This debate is an ongoing one with some writers suggesting that HE should be focusing on supporting students with employability (Knight and Yorke 2006 [1]; Cole and Tibby 2013 [2]; Cashian et al 2015 [3]), whilst others suggesting that HE should be concentrating on developing knowledge and educating students on their courses (Reading 1997 [4]; Collini 2012 [5], Docherty 2015 [6]). Participants in this research tended to focus on the former objective, although care should be used when extrapolating these findings given that those participating are engaged in CPD activities.

The academic lead for CPD articulated the purpose of the suite of modules clearly:

“In creating the CPD suite of modules; we wanted the students to embrace the learning journey and steer it in the direction that was best for them; we entitled it ‘continuing professional development – CPD’ to mirror the world of work as it is important in all we do has a focus on the goal of creating agile students ready to embrace the world of graduate work. This is also reflected in the universities strategy as one of the key visions is around supporting employability”

This link to the world of work is a key finding – although students originally applied to study a Business course, the need to ensure that things were contextualised to the world of work means that the CPD modules fit in with an overall ethos that stresses the importance of what students go on to do, as well as what they are currently studying. One of the employability tutors supported this assertion:

“There have been some significant changes to the world of work in the last 10 years, particularly the speed of change brought about by the increasing use of technology which is changing the design of jobs. There is also recognition that the world is in the grips of a Fourth Industrial Revolution which presents many exciting opportunities. With these rapid changes taking place, students need to be able to understand and anticipate what employers expectations are of them as graduates, to develop the required skills, experience and behaviours to enable them to successfully navigate the graduate labour market. The CPD module is an important element of a Business degree for many reasons. With the large number of students and the diversity of their needs and requirements, it is key that students can pick topics and workshops that fit with their individual development needs and career aspirations to enable them to secure a good graduate outcome in an increasingly competitive labour market. As well as having a menu of topics students can choose from at each year, there are also a number of core sessions that provide students with the basics of what they need to help them with their career decision making throughout their degree.”

What was interesting was that many of the students embraced this ethos having originally been sceptical regarding their purpose. Whilst some mentioned the fact that they expected to study Business rather than CPD, most could identify the purpose of the modules when questioned and many students gave constructive views of how they embraced the CPD modules and the philosophy driving the employability focus of curriculum. This current placement year student was a typical example; when he reflected on the CPD for a school news article:

“The Continuous Professional Development module has been incredibly beneficial to my academic achievement thus far during my studies at Coventry University, and contributed towards my ability to obtain the equivalent of a First-Class equivalent classification for the first year of my Business Management degree. What I like about CPD is that it is tailored
to your personal development, allowing you to select the ways in which you accumulate
the required points total through free choice of the lectures and seminars that you find
beneficial. It has enabled me to further develop my interpersonal skills as well as gain a
better understanding of the professional work environment, which I endeavour to enter
during my placement next year and then after graduation in 2020. The increased contact
hours with lecturers and seminar leaders that arise from the CPD module ensure that you
make the most out of your degree as a business student, and provide an invaluable basis
from which your other modules during the year allow you to mature further both
academically and independently.”

Whilst the importance of CPD was stressed by many participants, what was interesting was the way in
which students related to the module. The self-identity of students tended to centre on seeing
themselves as ‘different’ and hence the idea of a personalised learning journey was deemed as positive.
This is an interesting finding given the expansion of HE within the UK and the way in which many courses
view students in a homogenous manner. In the interests of fairness, all students are assessed in the
same way, yet, the findings of this research show that each student saw themselves as an individual.
Indeed, each participant was clear about their own individual needs and how they could be met so it
was assumed this approach would be welcomed by all students.

“Yeah, I liked it; I could choose what I wanted and what would be helpful. I have never liked
public speaking so I did a course on that which helped. We can’t complain about the
lessons if we chose then either can we!”

This was backed up by another student who made similar points around choice and personal
accountability.

“What I liked about it (CPD) was I got to choose, so I could see what I needed and choose
related things. My employability tutor was also great, it felt like I was the important one.”

Although the majority did like the approach, a minority did not fully engage. There appeared to be a split
in the student population between those who excelled on the CPD modules and embraced the ethos
and supports available and others who wanted to approach these modules as they do traditional subject
specific modules. The latter group tended to take an instrumental approach to pass the module and
selected modules to ensure that they completed the work in the most time effective way possible,
choosing classes that were easy or fitted with their other commitments rather than ones that would
stretch, support and develop them most. This student was a typical example of this instrumental
approach to the modules:

“I don’t believe most of the CPD activities are helpful to me as most of my schedule is taken
up with work experience and volunteering thorough out the week; it is difficult for me to fit
in more lectures than ones for my degree which I am most concentrated on……… I don’t
believe that most of the CPD lectures are of any interest to most students other than
collecting the mandatory points.”

What was clear was that, although many students were aware of the benefits of CPD, there were some
who did not subscribe to the ethos and who saw the modules merely as hurdles to be cleared as they
progressed to an overall goal. This approach was typified by the quote above and below from two final
year students:

“Overall I understand why these classes were important they are to give us an advantage
from other university applicants and that reflects well on the university too. However, they
were not as useful as they intended, we have so much to focus on in our final year that all
these classes just seemed like a waste of my time and I only went to gather the points
needed to pass this class (module)……”

However, whilst these students made up a substantial minority of the student population, the majority
were positive about the experience. This final year student eloquently articulated the views of many:

“All the CPD workshops and additional points have been helpful to me, to expand my
knowledge and gain new skills. I feel that what I have learnt will be skills for life and
something I will look back on in the future to help me progress.”

“As a whole, we students are delighted with the vast array of choices for the CPD Module. Some
students completed internships in the summer, as I did and genuinely felt they benefitted from the CPD sessions as it made that bridge of university life to work life a relatively seamless one. I love the fact I can choose my own personal path of collecting
points and the reflection allows me to see the personal benefits and skills I am gaining from the CPD as well as the year on year progress I am making”

Final Year Business Students

There was anecdotal feedback within the student focus group that generally weaker students were the ones who saw the modules merely as another hurdle to navigate. They failed to embrace the ethos of developing your own personalised learning path to develop key skills to become more employable. It was a learning to pass approach which is a whole other research project in itself.

4 CONCLUSION

To sum up this research, there is still much debate around the embedding of employability skills and other practical support within the curriculum of a higher education degree. There has been a considerable amount of work written and evidenced on universities being a place for personal growth of knowledge (Readings 1997; Collini 2012; Docherty 2015) and also as a place to gain employability skills (Knight and Yorke 2006; Cole and Tibby 2013; Cashian et al 2015). This research has provided evidence for both sides of the argument. What has become clear is that there is not a universal approach to employability amongst higher education institutions or students with some embracing it, and valuing the embedding of employability throughout the course of study and time at university, whilst others seeing it as merely one part of a bigger course, that needs to be addressed to pass and progress.

The other key focus for this paper was how the university has moved away from a standardised approach to delivering employability and skills within the curriculum and as a result course content, with personalised learning, is coming to the forefront. This means that individualised support that each student feels they may want and/or need is at the heart of the programme. This research raises the question, is this what universities should be focusing on and do students know what they want or need for employability in the future? This is especially pertinent given the fact that whilst the majority of students viewed the modules in a positive manner, a significant minority took an instrumental approach and saw them as merely something else to pass in order to gain their degree.

With that in mind and with feedback from both staff working on and students taking the CPD modules, the delivery is currently being changed to become more of a hybrid approach, with some structured, generic sessions married up with students choosing other sessions. This is intended to try to address many of the problems experienced with students unsure what they wanted to do for a career, focusing on employability was not easy for them, a more structured route with choice currently appears to be the way forward.

The preliminary findings suggests that the proactive, focused and studious students embraced the approach and new learning experience but many of the cohort, just wanted to know what to do to pass the assessment and progress. It is difficult when conducting research and implementing innovations into the classroom, for academic staff not to project their ideals or views of what is best without standing back to realise that all students are unique and different and whilst some want to develop and prepare for the world of work beyond higher education, many do not.

REFERENCES

[1] Knight, P; and Yorke, M; (2006); ‘Embedding employability into the curriculum’ Higher Education Academy, York, England.


