

EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

Embedding employability in the curriculum: enhancing students career planning skills

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Summary

This case study describes and discusses the experience of developing and delivering a career planning module for final year hospitality and tourism undergraduates at Oxford Brookes University. The story encapsulates both the philosophy and the practical aspects of adopting this approach to embedding employability in the curriculum.

Objectives

The stated aim of the bachelors' degree at Oxford Brookes is to '*develop effective and innovative managers for the international hospitality and tourism industries*' (Student Handbook 2004/5). In order to achieve this aim the University not only needs to provide a programme of study that is current, academically rigorous and vocationally relevant, but also needs to help students acquire the confidence and appropriate skills that allow them to make an effective transition from education to work. *Career Planning for Hospitality & Tourism* is a final year undergraduate module designed to help students manage that transition successfully. It encourages them to know themselves, know what types of employment they are suited to, and aims to provide them with skills to enhance their career prospects in a highly competitive labour market. Specific objectives addressed by the module are:

- To raise students' awareness of the career opportunities available in the labour market
- To enhance students' understanding of the skills and attributes required for successful graduate employment
- To provide students with tools that enable them to audit their own skills for employment, and enable them to plan their personal and professional development
- To encourage students to plan for their future career via the development of individual career plans and strategies
- To build students self confidence and encourage them to effectively articulate their abilities to prospective employers
- To encourage students to value their work and personal experiences and acknowledge their achievements
- To help students develop job application skills and provide useful feedback on their CV and career plan
- To encourage students to develop skills that help them make an effective transition from University to work

Rationale

Employability is by no means a new issue for Higher Education (HE), and the need for graduates to make an effective contribution to the labour market was highlighted as long ago as 1963 in the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963). However, more recently Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been forced to address the employability debate head on, and the last decade in particular has seen an unprecedented level of external pressure for them to prove that the graduates they are producing are 'adding value' to the economy. The Dearing Report (1997) made explicit the importance of education for employability and highlighted the value of key skills development and work experience in developing students' potential for employment. Subsequent publications by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have sought to offer guidance to Universities on how they might embed employability within their institutional strategy and how this might translate into practical provision for students at course level. Two publications of particular note are the National Qualifications Framework (QAA, 2001a) and the Code of Practice document on Career Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG) (QAA, 2001b). In the former publication Level H descriptors (honours degree level) clearly outline the qualities and skills necessary for graduate employment, whilst the latter publication is far more explicit about how HEIs should prepare students for their future careers in a rapidly changing labour market. Personal Development Planning (PDP) is seen to be a key aspect of student career development, linking in with notions of lifelong learning, and it is a requirement that by 2005/6 all students in HE should produce some sort of *progress file* by the time they graduate. The *progress file* should consist of two elements; a 'transcript' or record of student achievement and a 'personal record' of students learning, achievements, progress reviews and plans (QAA, 2001c).

Whilst the advice contained in these publications provides a useful steer for universities, the myriad ways in which employability can be addressed in practice in HE represents a very real challenge for educators. Employability is a complex,

multi-dimensional concept which goes way beyond the rather narrow 'key skills' agenda suggested by Dearing and HEIs are addressing it in different ways. What has become increasingly clear is that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to tackling student development in this area and that simplistic statistics (on graduates' first employment destination for example) are not particularly useful measures of a student's capability to tackle graduate jobs.

Some very useful research by Peter Knight, Mantz Yorke and Lee Harvey conducted under the remit of ESECT (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team) has resulted in a series of guides and resources offering practical advice on embedding employability in the HE curriculum (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=filter_fields§ion=generic&type=some&id=5).

Harvey and Knight (2003) suggest that there are four inter-related areas that students need to develop:

1. Employability attribute development;
2. Self-promotional or job getting skills;
3. Willingness to learn and continue learning;
4. Reflection and articulation

It is recognised that students themselves need to take responsibility for their own development. Academics cannot do this for them, but they can help provide opportunities that can help them do it. Yorke (2004) suggests five ways that employability can be developed through the curriculum:

1. Employability through the whole curriculum
2. Employability in the core curriculum
3. Work-based or work-related learning incorporated as one or more components within the curriculum
4. Employability-related module(s) within the curriculum
5. Work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum

These approaches are often found in combination in courses, and Yorke is keen to point out that a variety of approaches can work very effectively in tandem. The career planning module described in this case study would fall under approach number 4 above, and seeks to address all four of the inter-related areas of student development.

Context

Oxford Brookes University has a strong reputation for providing excellent vocational education within the framework of a well developed modular programme structure. The introduction of this new module came at a time of significant change at Oxford Brookes University. In 2002 the University made a decision to change the structure of the academic teaching year and so began a two-year planning process involving a major redesign and revalidation of the University's academic course portfolio. The outcome of this was that in September 2004 the University made the transition from a term-time structure of three 10-week blocks, to a semester structure of two 15-week blocks. In addition to the change in the structure of the teaching year the University also reconfigured the School/Faculty structure, an outcome of which was the merger of the School of Business and the School of Hotel & Restaurant Management. These changes initiated a major review of tourism and hospitality programmes and allowed the course teams to develop and update their provision to meet the needs of graduates and employers in the twenty first century. The period of change essentially provided an opportunity to reflect on our approach to developing the employability of hospitality and tourism students and to ensure that curricula reflected current thinking in this area. It also allowed us to address the wider institution's developing employability strategy and their approach to implementing PDP.

The hospitality and tourism course teams have long recognised employability as a core aspect of our undergraduate provision and there was a shared philosophy amongst colleagues about how best this could be delivered. Within the formal curriculum, core or transferable skills would remain embedded within compulsory 'subject'

modules, with specialist work-based and work-related modules providing students with an opportunity to develop employability skills in realistic work environments. Thus the course employed a combination of the approaches to embedding employability advocated by Yorke (2004). The Career Planning for Hospitality & Tourism module therefore represents only one aspect of employability skills development within a student's programme of study, and is designed as part of a comprehensive *package* of modules and extra curricular activities. This *package* incorporates a 40-week period of work placement, a work based learning portfolio, several work-related learning modules (e.g. 'live' case studies, consultancy projects, entrepreneurship and events management modules) and a programme of complementary careers events and activities running alongside the formal curriculum. The career planning module was designed as a 'capstone' to the course, encouraging students to reflect on all four years of their education and to begin in earnest to prepare themselves for entering the labour market.

Description

Having established that a career planning module would enhance the curriculum, the development progressed through a series of key stages.

Stage 1 incorporated both primary and secondary research. In addition to a comprehensive review of the literature on employability and career management, a small scale survey of Oxford Brookes hospitality graduates was undertaken to determine which employability attributes were important for career success. Funded jointly by the HE Academy subject network for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism and Oxford Brookes University Student Services, the survey provided some interesting and useful data on which specific skills or attributes might be addressed specifically by this module (<http://www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/networkfunded.html>). In addition to the survey, I also carried out a series of interviews with graduate recruiters, employers and employment specialists. This first stage research was crucial in

establishing the parameters of the module and what types of issues it could and should be addressing. It was clear that the module needed to cover the following key areas:

- Awareness of labour market opportunities and skills required for success in employment
- Increasing students self confidence and awareness of their own capabilities
- Increasing students capacity to adapt to change and plan for the future
- Enhance students time management and prioritizing skills
- Improve students networking skills
- Improve students job getting skills, including their ability to articulate their attributes and achievements to employers

The module also needed to be pitched at the right level in terms of academic and intellectual development for a level 3 honours module. It was very important that this module was seen by students (and colleagues) to be academically rigorous and appropriately challenging if it was to deliver its aims successfully.

Stage 2 involved the production of the module description for review and validation. The module description includes learning outcomes, indicative content and assessment requirements for the module (see Appendix 1). It was decided that the module should be delivered over the final two semesters of the students programme. The rationale was that students should start the process of career planning as early as possible in their final year of study and that this would also give them time to reflect on and develop their skills for employment over a period of months. It was proposed that the module be designated as one of four honours level modules within the undergraduate programme, (worth fifteen level 3 credits from a total of 240 credits) and be compulsory for students studying on the four year programmes in hospitality and tourism (approximately 120 students per year). The module would involve a total of 24 hours contact time per student delivered

via a programme of lectures, interactive workshops and culminating in a mock graduate assessment centre. Total study time for the module would be 150 hours including independent preparation and study. The module was successfully validated in July/August 2003 and was planned to run for the first time in September 2004.

Stage 3 of module development was a phase of detailed planning and production of module documentation. In order to make the module more appealing (and useful) for students I was very keen to involve external speakers and employment specialists in its delivery, and also to build in opportunities for students to experience 'real world' activities such as employer recruitment events and networking, and assessment centre practice. Much time was spent on the telephone in an attempt to source some form of industry sponsorship and those I contacted were, in the main, extremely enthusiastic and keen to help in any way they could. In addition to securing almost £3,000 from the Savoy Educational Trust, I was also able to engage a range of external specialists who were prepared to contribute their time and company resources either free or at cost. Once this was accomplished, the next task was to put together the study schedule for the module. The study schedule is designed to help students move from a process of self-analysis to an understanding of labour market opportunities in order that they can match their skills to those sought by prospective employers. The second part of the module focuses on developing students 'job getting' skills (e.g. CV writing, selection tests, time management, career planning) so that they are equipped with the ability to successfully secure employment. At this stage a key task was to develop the module assignment and assessment criteria (see Appendix 2). The use of a portfolio for assessing student learning is consistent with the self-development and reflective practice philosophy underpinning the module (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983 and 1987) and is an approach that is also found useful for continuing professional development used in the workplace (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1994). The inclusion of a CV and personal statement within the portfolio also meets the University's requirement for PDP.

The assessment criteria grid in Appendix 2 is based on research conducted by Price and Rust (2004) and is designed to provide guidance for students in producing their assignment, as well as being a means of summatively assessing their achievement of the learning outcomes for the module. Although students were not in class every week, the module handbook contained weekly self-study activities and reading to help students build towards the production of their portfolio.

Module Delivery

This section discusses the actual delivery of the module. My intention here is to highlight key aspects of the module and its impact on student development, rather than cover all of the taught sessions in detail.

Self analysis and self awareness – the first session on the module reminds students of the concept of self-development and reflective learning. Students make connections between this approach and their own continuing professional development. An external training company provided students with the opportunity to complete an on-line assessment of their work preferences and work motivations (information on this test can be found at <http://www.jobeq.com/applications.htm>). A specialist from the company came and debriefed the students on their results and how they could be used to help them understand what types of organisation or work environment might best suit their profile. Following this session an employment consultant specialising in career coaching came and delivered a highly imaginative and interactive session encouraging students to develop a clear vision of where they wanted to be in 10 years time. The session required students to write a series of very specific steps that would enable them to attain their vision or goal. Both of these sessions produced some really interesting reactions in the students. They found the sessions very engaging and useful in helping them clarify what it was they needed to be thinking about. One of the really interesting outcomes was that a considerable number of students reported that they had revised their career aspirations as a result of better

understanding their internal motivations and thinking about what career would be fulfilling for them. Rather than focusing on securing a 'typical' graduate traineeship with a large company (which is how most had envisaged the 'right type of career'), some students were now focusing their research on smaller companies or on niche occupations. This outcome, in my opinion, was significant as it meant that students were developing a better understanding of themselves and what they wanted from life (a crucial aspect of increasing their self confidence). It also meant that students could adopt a job search strategy that would enable them to better identify which skills they would need for successful employment in their chosen career.

Awareness of labour market opportunities – this was developed and encouraged in a number of ways. In addition to a session delivered by two international recruitment specialists in hospitality and tourism, students were directed to a wide range of resources that would help them assess career opportunities for graduates. The Prospects website was a particularly useful resource and provided students with a wide range of advice and guidance on job searching. In addition to this students were offered the opportunity to attend employer presentations organised by our Departmental Careers & Work Experience Office. These weekly presentations were delivered by a wide range of hospitality and tourism employers, some of whom interviewed students for graduate positions on campus. Students on the module were given the opportunity to 'host' at one of these employers events. This might involve meeting and greeting, taking the employer to lunch and/or ensuring the employer was shown to the right room and that the equipment was all in order. This provided students with a chance to meet one-on-one with an employer they might be very keen to work for and to develop their interpersonal and networking skills. Students were also required to attend two additional sessions organized by the Careers & Work Experience Office. One is called *Focus on Careers* and involves a panel of senior employers from various industry sectors who each present for 10 minutes on what they are looking for in

graduate recruits. This is followed by a Q&A session where students can ask specific questions of the panel and, later, an informal wine reception where students can talk directly and informally to the employers. The second session is a *Networking Evening* which is organised in association with our Departmental Alumni Association (Bacchus). The evening allows current students to speak with Oxford Brookes hospitality and tourism graduates over a meal in the Brookes Restaurant. There are one or two graduates per table and students move around at regular intervals to talk to graduates about their career to date and to pick up top tips on how to make the transition from University to work.

This combination of employer presentations, labour market research and advice, and personal networking opportunities raised students' awareness of the graduate labour market and the opportunities therein and encouraged them to develop a suitable job search strategy, perhaps exploring career options they might not have initially considered. More importantly this exposure to employers and graduates made students far more realistic about what to expect in terms of career opportunities (unrealistic and inflated expectations were a major criticism cited by the graduate recruiters and employers I had spoken with as part of my initial research).

Awareness of graduate attributes – in addition to the exposure to employers and graduates cited above, students were required to critically evaluate the research that has been carried out on graduate employability and graduate attributes. The first part of the portfolio assignment is designed to focus attention on what types of attributes lead to graduate success and how these relate to the industry or sector the student is seeking employment in. The students are encouraged to reflect on their own skills for employment by assessing themselves against graduate attributes lists (see for example Appendix 3) and using self-analysis tools such as those contained in the Windmills Programme (<http://www.windmillsprogramme.com/>). Students are encouraged to identify any potential skills 'gaps' and to plan for how they can overcome these by engaging in appropriate development activities. It is

interesting to note that students reported an improvement in their vocabulary about employability and they felt better able to articulate to their attributes to potential employers (see CV writing discussion below). Students were also able to see more clearly the skills they did possess and how their higher education experiences had enabled them develop their attributes for employment. Helping students see the relationship between education and employment was a key objective of the module and it was very rewarding to see students begin to understand this for themselves.

Job getting skills (including articulating and evidencing achievement) - a knowledge of their own employment skills, the career opportunities available and graduate attributes is perhaps of only limited use if the student cannot translate this in some practical sense to actually getting a graduate job. Students need to have an ability to sell themselves effectively in the employment market both on paper (e.g. excellent CV, cover letter, application, selection tests) and in person (e.g. great interview skills, interpersonal communication and networking abilities). Underpinning these practical skills is the need for students to be able to manage time and prioritise tasks effectively. Graduate recruiters and employers I spoke to were unanimous in their disappointment with the quality of job applications and CVs they received from students about to graduate and with students' inability to properly organize themselves and manage their time and tasks when they did start work. The module provided a session on CV writing and applications delivered by a recruitment specialist followed by practical workshops on developing CVs and covering letters. Students were directed to a range of paper and online resources to help them develop their job application and CV writing skills, and were offered feedback on their draft CV by module tutors. To be frank it came as somewhat of a shock to see for myself the very poor quality of students' first attempts at producing a CV, and I was extremely pleased that tutor feedback and advice had been offered as part of the module prior to students submitting CVs to potential employers. Students were also given an

opportunity to practise selection tests under test conditions, and to engage in mock interviews with peer feedback. The portfolio assignment required students to produce a CV and cover letter or personal statement targeted at a particular graduate position. This enabled students to practise summarising their achievements and skills in a way that made their applications attractive to employers. Students were also required to reflect on how they could evidence their skills for employment and to incorporate this into the Reflective Commentary section of the portfolio. The feedback from students about this was interesting. The majority of students had never really thought about how they might evidence their skills and many assumed that employers would accept that having a degree was evidence enough of their abilities and skills. Students struggled at first with evidencing skills, but with some prompting and support they became more confident in how they might do this. A really pleasing side effect of this process was that it enabled students to see just how much they had to offer and what they had achieved both within and outside their formal study programme. Students were encouraged to celebrate their successes and again this helped build their self confidence, and to make the important link between their educational and personal achievements and the world of work.

Mock Assessment Centre – a half-day mock assessment centre was held off campus at a local hotel property towards the end of the module. The focus of the assessment centre was to give students an opportunity to experience a 'real world' exercise that would allow them to bring together their learning from various stages of the module. Amongst other things, the focus was on helping students develop their time management, decision making and prioritising skills and to feel what it was like to complete activities under time pressure (experiences difficult to emulate in the traditional classroom). The assessment centre was organised by the teaching team and involved students in a series of team building and decision making activities, time management/prioritising (in-tray) exercises, selection tests and one-on-one performance feedback. The students' response to the day was hugely positive. The fact that the

day was delivered by very experienced human resource managers from the hospitality industry, and that it was held off campus, really added to the authenticity of the event and gave students a taste of what it would feel like to experience the real thing. Students did find the in-tray exercises hard and also many commented that the selection tests were something they needed to go away and practise with. It was very gratifying to witness the reactions of students both during and after the event – they found the day challenging, but really enjoyable and many of them emailed me later in the year to let me know how much it had helped them when they had participated in a real assessment centre.

Evaluation

Much of the discussion outlined above is based on informal feedback from students during the delivery of the module and my own observations. In addition to this a more formal evaluation of the module was conducted using a questionnaire completed by students during the final taught session.

Students - The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive and they reported good progress in the key areas of self-awareness, self-confidence, labour market awareness, understanding of graduate attributes and job application skills. A high proportion of students (84%) agreed that the module had been 'very/quite useful' in preparing them for their career. The quality of portfolios submitted was very good overall and student achievement in terms of grades attained was above average compared to the average for other level three/honours modules (59% compared with an average mark of 54% across level 3 modules).

Tutors – Tutors were impressed with the enthusiasm demonstrated by the students studying on the module, and reported higher than average levels of attendance in the taught sessions. Tutors were also impressed with the high quality of student assignments. The teaching team was initially concerned about whether students would engage at an appropriate level with academic literature, but it was encouraging to see some excellent analytical reports on graduate employability and the labour market. Literature on career management

and self development was also effectively used by many students in their assignment.

External examiner - The external examiner's comments were encouraging and he felt that this was one of the best modules he had examined on this topic. I quote *'an interesting module with some innovative angles. The guest speakers in semester 1 represent an informative basis for the student's assessments in semester 2. The module handbook is very thorough and the module is sound in terms of aims and objectives with relevant learning outcomes to the students' needs. The feedback is thorough and moderation apparent, resulting in fair and consistent marking. The self-reflection is in the main excellent, and the better performing students made good use of the theoretical frameworks. The report structure worked well, with the focus on reflection and interpretation rather than just data regurgitation'*.

Discussion

In an increasingly competitive and volatile graduate employment market it is vital that students are equipped with skills that enable them to maximise their potential for a successful career. The Government's aim to increase HE participation amongst school leavers to 50% by 2010 and changes in the industrial structure of the country will have profound effects on the type of work graduates will engage in. As the number of graduates entering the workforce increases, so competition for jobs intensifies. Also, the decline in the proportion of graduates following traditional career paths in large national/multi-national organisations and the emerging trends of service sector employment, in small/medium sized firms (and self-employment) has implications for the types of skills needed by graduates. The speed of industrial change and fluctuations in the economic cycle mean that graduates are likely to move jobs more often and will seek work in different industrial

sectors. According to McNair (2003), successful graduates will need to have greater ownership of their employability skills and the confidence to cope with economic upheavals in order to identify and capitalise on career opportunities over a lifetime.

The employment market is changing in ways which make it more important than ever for students and graduates to take personal responsibility for managing their own career development throughout life. For this they need to develop the skills to manage their own career including the abilities to reflect and review, to plan and make decisions, to use information resources effectively, to create and take opportunities, and to make provision for lifelong learning (QAA, 2001b).

Employability needs to be distinguished from employment. Employment means having a job whereas being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace – it is about producing graduates who are 'capable' and 'able'. (Lees, 2002). Employability is fundamentally about learning to learn and is not a product but a process.

'Employability is a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.' (Yorke, 2004)

This case study has presented one example of how Oxford Brookes University is developing the employability of its students by providing them with the skills and knowledge to plan for their future career. At the heart of this approach is the philosophy of creating a learning environment that values and promotes self reflection and values experiential learning. This infuses the entire curriculum and is central to our approach to learning and teaching on this module.

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