

A model for enhancing and embedding employability and supporting progression in the curricula for the humanities (Summary Report)

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Contexts for the Project

Research has shown us that although all graduates are facing problems in their progression beyond their undergraduate degree, Arts and Humanities graduates face particular challenges. Many Humanities students enter higher education due to interest in their subject area (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996) and often face an extended transition from study to 'graduate level' employment (Allen, R. 2006). A recent Highflyers survey (2010) indicated that just 25% of students from Arts and Humanities subjects expect to find a graduate level job compared with 54% of those on Business courses. They also tend to receive lower salaries than more numerate graduates (De Coulon et al 2006). The pressures of the recession argue the need to equip Humanities students with tools to enable them successfully to navigate what will now otherwise become an increasingly 'longer and more complex' (British Academy, 2004) transition after graduation.

The University of Worcester 'graduate destination' figures show that, in fact, Humanities students enter a very wide range of careers and, in line with national trends, many have to undertake 'bridging' activities such as temporary or part time work, unpaid placements or further study before entering full- time employment. In order to enable Humanities students to manage and develop these non-linear career paths, it is vital that we equip them with appropriate employability skills and help them to recognise the vocational attributes of humanities degree programmes.

It was clear that these students will need support to develop and be successful in their career paths, but previous initiatives to support employability in the English department such as lunchtime sessions or optional accredited modules have had limited success due to low take up. An internal student survey (Watson, R. 2009) showed that many have high levels of anxiety about their future careers but that they are ambivalent about attending lunchtime sessions and other activities which are seen as 'bolt-on', suggesting they are more likely to value activities within the curriculum which they feel are recognised by academic staff. The survey also showed us that the students' enthusiasm to tackle these issues were at their greatest in the first year, but declined as their anxiety levels increased in their final year. A more radical model would be required. We needed to find a way of integrating employability enhancing activity into the curriculum, introducing this at a very early stage so students would be better prepared by their final year.

The Project Processes

We were successful in a bid to the local Lifelong Learning Partnership, and established a steering group comprising ourselves, the Head of Institute, four subject 'champions' and an external consultant. Due to project requirements, the funding was just for two semesters, but the work was scoped to continue beyond this.

The aim of the project was to research and develop a model for embedding employability and progression and to test the model across at least two subject areas over the first year with the intention to roll out to all subject areas within the institute in the following year.

Project activities included:

- Institute-wide away days at the beginning and end of the project
- Staff and student feedback surveys.
- Development and testing of materials for use with students at level 4 and 5
- Development of personal tutor materials for use at level 6.
- Compilation of database of local employers relevant to arts and humanities students.
- Employers' lunch

Materials devised included the following;

- Level 4 induction session: Reasons to be cheerful. The success/failure myth
- Level 4 Session 1: Reflecting on experience, identifying success. The mini story
- Level 4 Session 2: Imagining futures; progression planning
- Level 5 Session 1: Progression, employability and skills quiz
- Level 5 Session 2: Securing success; skills to get what you want
- Level 6: Tutorial handbook

To achieve consistency all students would work through these materials. Subject champions identified appropriate space in the curriculum, which tended to be within mandatory modules. Materials are available at <http://www.worc.ac.uk/adpu/1185.htm>

Project successes and lessons learned

Academic staff engagement: The initial staff away day indicated that employability is a contentious term for academics with concerns both about the concept of employability but also a lack of confidence in working with the employability agenda. These issues were addressed by:

- Open discussion about the concept and terms: agreement that the discourse must include 'progression' as the main objective.
- Acting on student feedback: Academic staff are genuinely concerned about the needs of the students and the student survey and graduate destinations information were both important vehicles to achieve change.
- Subject champions: a number of staff value the opinions of colleagues who have themselves worked through the process, rather than initiatives driven from above or external to the institute.
- The production and evaluation of materials: the materials and teaching notes supported those colleagues who were less confident in the delivery. Although many adapted the materials to suit their own style and purpose, they appreciated having a starting point.
- Employability audit. What started as an overview of good practice within the institute grew as a developmental tool, with staff increasingly recognising the employability elements of their provision after sharing comments with colleagues.

Student feedback: Student responses to the sessions and materials used have been very positive, with students responding well to materials which were particularly relevant to them. For example, the quiz was based partly on information drawn from the survey at induction, and students appreciated the localised element.

The student survey at induction was interesting in that it highlighted possible areas of tension between students' expectations of the future and the reality faced by graduates. For example, a large number of students indicated that they had entered higher education to improve their employment prospects (this just behind 'studying at a higher level' as a response), and the majority indicated an interest in a career specifically related to their subject area. However, destination figures indicate that students enter a wide range of

employment areas, many unrelated to areas of study. This suggests the need to introduce students to a wider range of post graduate possibilities.

Working with Employers:

It became apparent that in some, although not all cases, contact with employers needed further development. This may be due to lack of awareness of graduate destinations or of the local and national labour market. This was addressed by:

- The development of a shared database of employers willing to work with the university, offering work placements, graduate level jobs, visiting speaker sessions etc.
- An employer lunch was successful in continuing the debate further and extending ideas.
- Work across teams at the second away day enabled colleagues to extend links and share good practice in their work with employers and external agencies.

The institutional context:

At the same time as the project, the Institution has been further developing its strategy towards employability, including the Employable Worcester Graduate framework, and the requirement for work related learning across all undergraduate programmes. By engaging with the agenda through the project, the Institute of Arts and Humanities has already discussed and addressed many of these issues.

Next steps:

It is acknowledged that this project was just the first stage in embedding career and progression across the curriculum. Further steps over the next few years will include:

- Strategies to ensure the continuation of employability and progression themes tracked through Annual Course Evaluation Reports and changes to module specifications.
- Continuing to develop, implement, and evaluate the materials across the three levels of undergraduate study.
- Development of Blackboard pages for all subjects
- Developing ways of sharing further materials.
- Development of further materials to include pre-entry and post graduate resources
- Continuation and development of employer database

References

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