Embedding employability in non-vocational undergraduate courses: A reflection on practice across the Institute of Health and Society at the University of Worcester

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Introduction

Employability can be defined simply as the character or quality of being employable (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). For students, undertaking a higher education degree is largely framed in terms of becoming more employable (McCowan, 2015) and, as a result, preferring courses that enable them to develop transferrable knowledge and skills which will increase their competitiveness in the labour market (Gosling, 2009). The concept of employability therefore continues to be highly relevant in a higher education context, for both students in work and those seeking work (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Indeed, universities have an important responsibility to ensure their undergraduate courses have relevance to the employment market (Pothigai Selvan, 2013). The range of skills students develop in higher education is diverse, depending on their course and experience of work during study. Critical thinking, problem solving, research and analytical skills, interpersonal awareness, communication, self-reflection, time management, team working, and autonomy are key examples of skills developed during university and are highly attractive to a wide range of employers (Reddy, Lantz & Hulme, 2013). Given the importance of employability to students and prospective employers alike, it is imperative that careful consideration is given as to how to effectively embed employability across undergraduate courses. In light of this, this article aims to explore the ways in which employability is currently integrated across non-vocational disciplines within the Institute of Health and Society at University of Worcester, with a focus on key examples of practice drawn from Applied Criminology, Applied Health and Social Sciences and Psychology.

Embedding experience of practice in Applied Criminology

Employability is at the heart of the Applied Criminology programme at the University of Worcester. The course was developed in consultation with employers to ensure students are equipped with key skills aligned to the National Occupational Standards for the Justice Sector. A key feature of the programme is a mandatory practice-based module involving a number of placements with local employers. We spoke with Course Leader, Kate Bramford, to gain insight into the way in which she successfully embedded placements into the programme. She reflected on the following key points to consider when setting up placements:

- Developing formal relationships with criminal justice agencies and aligned services enables students to select from a range of established placement opportunities. Here the key emphasis is on maintaining a balance of organisational support and personal choice when gaining experience in a professional arena.
- Integrating professional experience and course contact time means that these experiences clearly build upon one another, rather than being seen as distinct. This is achieved by adopting a weekly timetable incorporating practice days alongside taught sessions that encourage students to reflect on how they have applied theory to practice.
- Providing structured supervision within the university and placement organisations ensures a clear and unified structure of support across both contexts.
- Reciprocity with placement organisations is fundamental. As such, mentor training is provided to their employees, enabling them to support students in their organisation as well as contributing to their own personal development.

Overall, this structure enables students to engage with employers, receive feedback on practice, develop a key skill set, and represent the University of Worcester in a professional arena.

Work Based Learning in Applied Health and Social Sciences

The Applied Health and Social Science programme incorporates a practical element through the mandatory Work Based Learning module at Level 5. This module is designed to help students apply theoretical models to practice, develop key practitioner competencies, and work effectively in groups and teams. The module leader, Dr Clive Sealey, told us about his approach to facilitating work based learning:

- Students are empowered by sourcing their own relevant placement provider, which could include their current paid or voluntary workplace.

- Centralised support is provided by the University of Worcester Work Based Learning office, which offers a standardised approach to ensuring suitability, assessment of risk, and monitoring student progress.
- The placement is assessed via a portfolio piece, which encourages students to reflect on specific examples from their workplace where they have applied theory learnt from the course.

The work based learning module fosters a sense of independence and enables students to develop hands-on-experience relevant to their individual career pathway.

Supporting Personal Development in Coaching Psychology

Coaching psychology is a level 6 module within the Psychology programme. The module provides an introduction to different theoretical approaches to coaching psychology and demonstrates the application of coaching models in practical sessions, in which students engage in peer coaching. The module leader, Dr Kazia Solowiej, reflects on the impact of embedding a peer coaching intervention within the module:

- Students gain experience of peer coaching within four practical sessions, in which they apply theoretical models of coaching in small groups.
- Emphasis is placed on students adopting the roles of coach, coachee and observer to develop relationships with equal status and enhance mutual support amongst students with similar training backgrounds.
- The intervention promotes skill development which is directly applicable to a range of occupational contexts, including self-awareness, goal setting, active listening, and delivering feedback.
- Students are provided with the opportunity for personal growth as they are encouraged to work towards, and take ownership of, relevant self-defined goals, such as successfully completing a job application.

The opportunity to participate in peer coaching provides students with the opportunity to take part in a skills-based activity that allows them to apply evidence-based approaches to real life situations and encourages self-reflection on their personal development.

Developing Effective Communication and Ethical Practice in Foundation Degrees

Effective Communication and Ethical Practice is a level 4 module that is shared by the foundation degrees in Health and Social Care, Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Dementia Studies. Students take part in three interactive activities as part of their formative assessment and complete a reflective patchwork piece to demonstrate knowledge and skill development in relation

to their communication abilities as reflective practitioners. Dawn Goodall, Course Leader, discusses the key aspects of the assessment:

- The assessment is designed to enable students to become reflective practitioners and to evidence their practice effectively.
- A series of three interactive role play activities give students the opportunity to apply relevant, current evidence to their practice in relation to communication and decision-making in therapeutic contexts.
- Role play activities are observed to give students experience of practical skill assessment. Formative feedback is also provided to allow students to reflect on their knowledge and skill development, based on the relationship between service user and practitioner.

The assessment provides the opportunity for students to develop skills in active listening and problem solving as well as providing a deeper understanding of reflective practice.

Employability is a key focus within higher education and, as this article has outlined, there are a number of different ways in which employability can be effectively embedded within non-vocational undergraduate courses. We have discussed ways in which students have the opportunity to develop practical skills and demonstrate the application of theory to practice. Although placements have played a key role in this regard, we have also seen how practical opportunities can be provided within skills-based activities delivered as part of taught modules. Such opportunities have wide-reaching benefits, including promoting the development of core employability skills, enhancing teaching quality, improving academic achievement, and enhancing student satisfaction (Brooks, 2012; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). We have also seen that providing opportunities for self-reflection and personal development through the use of assessment strategies has been valuable for enhancing employability and stimulating lifelong learning skills (Deeley, 2014). Given the increasingly competitive nature of the labour market, it is important that we continue to share best practice across the University and set aside time and space to reflect upon our experiences of using different strategies to enhance students' ability to successfully compete in the employment arena.

Acknowledgements

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Biographies

Dr Kazia Solowiej is a Senior Lecturer in Occupational Psychology. Her research interests are in the area of career development and success. Specifically, she is interested in what success means to individuals and how they achieve it. Her recent research has focused on exploring gender and occupational context in this area.

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Dr Kate Muse is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at University of Worcester. Her research interests focus on understanding factors that trigger and maintain mental health disorders and developing and disseminating effective treatments to alleviate psychological distress. In particular, her research focuses on the training and dissemination of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and methods of assessing the competence with which CBT is delivered. She has also conducted research investigating factors that maintain health anxiety, the efficacy of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy interventions for anxiety and depression, and the role of intrusive imagery in anxiety disorders.