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Using Real-Life Consultancies in Teaching, Learning to Enhance Student Employability

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a TLQIS project to investigate the approaches followed and the role that consultancy projects carried out for external corporate organisations currently play in student-centred learning and skills development at the University of Salford. Through a series of in-depth interviews, questionnaires and follow-up Delphi-type questioning approach, the research examined the use of placements and work-based consultancy across the Schools of the University. Findings show that placement remains the main form of external work-based learning activities. The main focus of the consultancy project form of teaching and learning activity was in the School of Environment & Life Sciences and Information Services Institute. The research demonstrated that student employability is potentially enhanced by embedding supportive knowledge-skills transfers into the teaching and learning process through the consultancy project approach. The paper discusses student reflections on their own learning and development of their competences from carrying out consultancy activities. It therefore provides insights for considerations in developing this approach as a method of learning.

Introduction

Employability is a set of achievements, knowledge and understanding and personal attributes that enhances an individual student's ability to successfully explore the opportunities of employment. Those acquiring these characteristic attributions exhibit the potential to add value to a future employer's operational activities. As the University Employability Task Group (2004) puts it, 'being able to articulate that value, characterised by self knowledge, practical knowledge of the working environment and the lifelong and career management skills, which enable employment to be sustained'. Embedding student skills development into teaching and learning strategies across programmes is part of the outcomes of approaches to current policies of the University of Salford. Despite the benefits of the traditional lecture, with its formal and authoritative style of discourse, backed by tutorial discussions, the approach is lacking in supporting individual learner's employability potentials. The problem-based learning approach provides a more direct approach to supporting students' employability development in helping them to seek solutions to real world problems, working in groups or individually. There are nevertheless a number of disadvantages that reduce the approach's effectiveness in attaining this objective. Two key issues are that it is institution-centred; making it difficult to properly reflect operational criteria in external organisations and its ability to meet employability goals is influenced by the cultural characteristics of the classroom and the ethos of on-site working.

Periods of work-based learning through period placements and consultancy projects carried out by teams of learners for external organisations provide two alternative models by which to support students in developing their employability potentials. Placements tend to follow the four-year full time integrated programme model that gives the opportunity of combining professional training and experience with academic study. The placement is valuable in developing practical abilities and in enabling

students to witness at first hand the inter-disciplinary nature of the particular programmes on which they are enrolled. It also provides the opportunity for them to gain an understanding of the world of work.

This paper reports the findings of a TLQIS research project the aim of which was to identify the main users of the consultancy approach to teaching and learning across the various Schools at the University of Salford and the issues involved for students and teachers using this mode of delivery. Its purpose was to evaluate the academic and vocational skills developed by the use of the consultancy approach and the resultant employability and career development potentials. The consultancies model approach requires teams of students to carry out projects for external organisations as real consultants. They negotiate the project boundaries, visit the client organisation as and when necessary to inform their investigations and present their report. Clients range from local authorities, service sector organisations, and companies from a variety of industrial sectors. This approach to teaching, learning and skills development was first piloted in the Department of Environmental Health and Housing at Salford as early as 1992; introduced on the BSc Environmental Sciences programme following the University of Salford's involvement in the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative in the early 1990s (Rennie, 1998). Accordingly, it was funded with the objective of developing Salford students' capability and their entrepreneurial skills. Various reports from universities in Australia, the UK and the USA that have applied this form of teaching and learning and together with the findings from academic educational research, suggest that learners develop their vocational skills rapidly (Knight and Yorke, 2002; Universities UK, 2002). These studies suggest that learners can develop their knowledge transfer capabilities in applying their academic knowledge to the 'real world' situations they face and by this prepare themselves for future career development, enhancing their employability potentials.

Review of Research and Literature

The idea of learning in the environment of the workplace has received considerable attention in higher education within the UK and internationally (Kolb, 1984; Saunders, 1995; Dunn, Porter et al., 1999; Sangster, Maclaran et al., 2000; Blackwell, Bowes et al., 2001; Gray, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Department of Health, 2002; DOH, 2002). Work based learning (WBL) is simply learning through engaging with the workplace in which full time learners, at universities, colleges or schools, or company employees attending part-time courses of education, follow individual programmes of learning through engaging in problem solving activities in the real world of work. In the international contexts educational establishments ranging from school level to higher education establishments in a number of European countries, including Belgium, Finland, France and Germany and countries such as Australia, India and the USA have emphasised the requirement for educators to take steps to prepare students for the world of work by perceiving and interpreting relations between higher education and employment and adopting work based learning approaches (for example see Teichler and Kehm, 1995). An important aspect of the University of Salford employability agenda relates its focus upon developing career management and key transferable skills of its students (Salford EDU, 2003). The recent White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, sets out the Government's plans to initiate a significant shift in the approach to teaching and learning and investment in higher education. The White paper importantly recognised the success and contribution of universities to the health of the UK and emphasised an 'education for industry' approach and the need for work-based and industry orientated

educational programmes (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). The University of Salford has recognised the potential of WBL to develop these important objectives.

Garrick and Usher (2000) have defined WBL as ‘a technology through which selves become enterprising, seeking betterment and fulfilment in the work context in ways that can be both personally and organizationally effective’. Accordingly, Barnett (1999) has argued that educators have recognised that learning takes place in the workplace and the knowledge that learners gain in carrying out WBL is ‘legitimate’. With respect to this, Garrick and Usher (2000) point to Barnett’s argument that it signalled a shift from a valorisation of theoretical (disciplinary) knowledge to problem-based ‘know-how’.

Method

The multi-stage research design was based on some key components of the qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Stage 1 of the research method included a pilot interview survey of ten staff members from five Schools. Information from these initial interviews were used to form the basis of a series of semi-structured in-depth taped interviews with nine of fourteen Associate Heads (Teaching) across the University and with one of the four Deans. In Stage 2 this qualitative methodology was enhanced by an adapted Delphi approach in which some of the common points extracted from the interviews were reduced to ten questions about employability and future consideration possibilities at Salford. Subsequently five key questions were then sent back to all interviewed for further comments. Stage 3 of the research was a quantitative methodology strand that comprised a questionnaire survey sent to a random sample of 300 academic staff drawn from each School. The first round of questionnaire was sent via the internal post, while follow up reminders were sent by email attachments. The total usable returns to the questionnaire strand comprised 10% response rate.

In Stage 4, the research method was supplemented by qualitative analysis of the reflective learning statements drawn from a sample of students from the 2004 and 2005 academic year cohorts from two degree programmes of the School of Environment and Life Sciences.

Findings and Discussions

The qualitative information from the taped interviews provided a large amount of information. This was supplemented from the questionnaire part of the research. Although the response rate to the questionnaire was low 10% - 31 from 300 sent out, those that were returned provided useful qualitative information as respondents had written at times detailed commentaries to the open ended questions. It became clear that in the cases where these questions that related to particular aspects of placements and consultancies were left unanswered it was due to the fact that the particular activity in question was not carried out nor operational as far as the individual respondent could ascertain.

Placements

Placements were seen by interviewees and respondents as an important part of students training and development for future employability. This form of externally oriented learning and development were the most widely used form of external student learning linkages. It was seen by interviewees as an important part of students’ training. Most of the interviewees considered that students who complete a good placement increased their chances of employment. They agreed that placements offered Salford students the

opportunity to learn new skills, to work in specialised areas related to their degree programmes, to learn to mix with new people across the company, develop communication capabilities and improve and maintain good time keeping practices. One of their views about the importance of employability was that it was nevertheless not the main objective of student placements. Placement work was often later related to their respective student's final year dissertations.

Most Schools using placement followed the traditional single-block period, usually 12 months at the end of the second year of the respective degree programme. Placement varied from the traditional model in the Health Professions disciplines for two main reasons. First, they were noticeable in their design for the students' personal development, cutting across the levels of programmes with a clear focus, structures and support frameworks in place. Thus the model used in the Healthcare professions programmes incorporated placements from short periods building up to longer periods across the levels as the students progressed through their respective degree programme. This progressive approach was in unique contrast to the traditional one-off placement period of up to 12 months at the end of Level 2 that was typically followed by most Schools using this form of work-based learning. Second, linked to the Health Council, they were mandatory as opposed to voluntary as were most cases found in other Schools.

An appreciable number of those Schools offering placement on a voluntary basis found it necessary to use various methods of coercion and encouragement to support students in their decision to take up placement opportunities. Despite being aware of future employability benefits of following an industrial placement students were reportedly demonstrating their preference for carrying on their degrees without interruption with the view of completing it earlier than later. Considered reasons cited included such students wanting to complete a long period of being in the education system and needing to get to work as soon as possible to reduce debt.

In response to questions about methods of assessment and students' own assessment of placements, it was found that placements were typically assessed, 81% by practice reports. The majority of respondents, 84%, said that they gathered information about students' satisfaction with their placements. Still, only a few could provide answers to questions about how their students ranked key aspects of effective work placement. Of the few that did, students were generally 'fairly satisfied' with their placements

Consultancy

The consultancy model of teaching and learning and student employability development was used in the School of Environment and Life Sciences (ELS) on the Environmental Health and Environmental Management programmes and in the Information Systems Institute (ISI). Few respondents across the survey outside ELS and ISI had heard of the consultancy approach. In the case of ELS the consultancy project module leader obtained new external consultancy projects during the summer period for students to commence in the second week of Semester 1 and to complete by the final week of the semester. In the approach used in ISI, students worked in teams with a number of major companies on ongoing projects. Thus whereas in the ELS case the consultancies were each individual one-off final year group projects, in the case of ISI the projects cut across programme levels, with teams of students, for example, five first years, five second years, and five final years comprising the team.

Accordingly, in ISI “what happens is that the first years students are new to project work finding their way and doing some of the very humdrum stuff. When the students return as for their second year, it is a new project and a new team; however, they take on more difficult aspects such as the more technical areas or project management and a bit more responsibility, for example, mentoring first year students on the project”. By final year students have become familiar with this approach and lead project team across the levels. Of two other schools that reported using consultancies the activities were carried out by academic staff with more senior students becoming involved on a voluntary basis.

Difficulties do exist for example where team members who do not pull their weight and attempt to ‘free ride’. Both ELS and ISI used assessment systems in which each team member must submit individual pieces of work, as well as their contribution to the team project. The group projects are assessed by group presentation as a team, and there is whole team documentation, including meeting logs, agendas, and minutes.

Developing Students’ Competencies and Employability

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present itemised responses to questions about how individual teaching teams in respective Schools actively promoted the development of students’ competencies to enhance their employability. Table 1 represents responses from the Healthcare profession group, including five directorates or discipline areas that responded. Table 2 represent responses from ELS including Housing, Biological Sciences, Geography, and Environmental Health and Environmental Management. Table 3 represents the itemised responses from others Schools, including Computing, Science & Engineering, ESPaCH, Media, Music & Performance, Construction and Property Management, Leisure and Hospitality and Management.

Table 1: Healthcare Professions - examples of actions taken to promote development of student competencies to enhance future employability

Briefly explain how you and your team actively promote the development of students' competencies to enhance their future employability, e.g. processes, procedures, curriculum design

Physiotherapy	<p>Practical based component to course working in the field at hospitals/centres that they may ultimately apply to for work post grad.</p> <p>Use of video footage of real patients to enhance their learning</p> <p>Mapped clinical work-based experiences</p> <p>Changed programme to a more problem-based learning approach</p> <p>Develop reflective writing skills</p> <p>Organise employment participation day</p> <p>Maintain links with students after graduation</p>
Occupational Therapy	<p>Problem-based learning</p> <p>Redesigned practice placements to encourage knowledge transfer</p> <p>Increased emphasis on student reflections</p>
Podiatry	<p>Developing clinical skills laboratory</p> <p>Full engagement in the personal development planning process</p> <p>Liaise with podiatry managers, employment of self and colleagues create a link with academia and the real world</p> <p>Making sure course is more relevant to changing workplace both NHS and private sector</p>
Prosthetics and Orthotics	<p>Practical clinical sessions with volunteer users</p> <p>Portfolio in year 4</p> <p>Skills for life-long learning programme</p>
Sports Rehabilitation	<p>Personal development processes</p> <p>Incorporate reasoning module into Levels 1 and 3</p>
Midwifery	<p>Develop learning outcomes from professional statutory regulatory benchmarks statements</p> <p>Mapped programmes to clinical competencies framework – Agenda for Change</p> <p>Assessment in practice by practitioners</p> <p>Problem-based learning approach</p> <p>Level 3 viva jointly examined by academic and clinicians</p>
Radiography	<p>Course team are practitioners</p> <p>Include accreditation body and external examiners opinions</p> <p>Work with employers</p> <p>Ensure development of correct clinical practical skills</p> <p>Lectures given by clinical specialists to give credibility</p>

Table 2: Environment & Life Sciences: examples of actions taken to promote development of student competencies to enhance future employability

Briefly explain how you and your team actively promote the development of students' competencies to enhance their future employability, e.g. processes, procedures, curriculum design

Housing	Liaison with professional body Liaise with careers service Organise interview and CV technique sessions Personal development planning
Biological Sciences	Personal development planning Key skills sessions Variety of laboratory classes
Geography	Personal development planning Offer placement option School/ college visits
Environmental Health	Mandatory placements Liaison with professional body External consultancy projects Personal development planning Key skills development
Environmental management	Optional Placements Consultancy Personal development planning Key skills development Develop reflective writing skills Emphasis on student reflections Alumni links with previous students

Table 3: Other schools: examples of actions taken to promote development of student competencies to enhance future employability

<i>Briefly explain how you and your team actively promote the development of students' competencies to enhance their future employability, e.g. processes, procedures, curriculum design</i>	
Computing, Science & Engineering	Implementation of University key skills policy Membership of professional organisations Staff active in industry research collaboration Promoting student placement scheme
ESPaCH	Personal tutorship meetings to promote career development Independent learning module Attempting to internationalise the curriculum Invite practitioner speakers Encourage enterprise through group projects at Level 3
Media, Music & Performance	Foundation degrees and top ups Embedding key transferable skills within the curriculum Promoting student work within the professional sector Reinforcing links with the careers unit Professional development week Enhancing PDP for music students Study field trips to industry Involved alumni with final year students
Construction & Property Management	Skills updating Research techniques Increasing knowledge base
Leisure & Hospitality	Preparation and production of CVs Developing team working skills Preparation of letters for employment
Management	Links with careers Key skills development Personal development planning Swift return of references

Student Reflections on Consultancy Activities

Students of the Environmental Health and Environmental Management programmes were given the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences. They were required to present their own reflections and plans for their personal development in response to the experiences of the consultancy activity. The students' reflections from academic year 2004-2005 were examined using qualitative content analysis. In carrying out these reflections they were required to consider areas for consideration as shown in Table 4.

As Table 4 shows, each assessed their own and the group's performances using four areas of reflection including reaction, perceived relevance, problems and triumphs, analysis of strengths and weaknesses and their own identified responsibilities culminating in their own suggested improvements for their future learning and personal development. In carrying out these reflections they identified the important issues involved for themselves as students using this mode of learning. Figure 1 represents a summary of their evaluated competences in terms of academic and vocational skills and employability and career development potentials of the approach as they saw it. Table 5 provides a synopsis of the students' reported likes and dislikes as discussed in their reflections and SWOT analysis.

Table 4: Areas of student reflections on consultancy projects

Area of student reflection	Details of reflection
Reaction	Reflection on own learning, performance and skills developed. E.g., scope, relevance and perception of work carried out by self.
Perceived relevance	How was the consultancy meaningful or how has it contributed to your understanding and skills development?
Problems and triumphs	What was actually experienced?
Analysis: Strengths and weaknesses	Reasons, motives, and interpretation of situations.
Identified responsibility	Suggested improvements for future learning and personal development potentials.

Figure 1: Learning outcomes and competencies identified by students as enhancing their employability



Table 5: Likes and dislikes recorded from ELS students' commentaries

Likes	Dislikes
Actively involved in a real situation Applying theory to practice Dealing with senior people in business and industry Teamwork and getting to know other students Finding out about own abilities Learning more about other students – their abilities Improvement in confidence	Time involved with other work to do with same credits Insufficient knowledge at the beginning Problems with clients, their availability and expectations Unequal effort in teams Different complexities between consultancies The whole idea - prefer lectures

In ISI accordingly on the whole, a lot of students say “I didn’t much enjoy it, I found it pretty tough but now that I am out in the world I see how important it is. Because you get people who don’t really want to take part, how do you encourage them without being too heavy handed or do you adopt a tough approach, all the personal or human approach as well. We think that is clearly linked to employability and a lot of our, we have an organisation, committee called MAC, we bring in fairly senior people from industry and generally they like to see project work. They see it is a valuable part of the course”.

Results from Modified Delphi Approach

Respondents were asked to comment upon and provide responses by way of statements to six questions, two of which required that they gave their views on the future development possibilities of employability at the University of Salford. Their respective responses were collated and are presented as follows:

Question 1: What is the importance of (1) the use of consultancy projects carried out for external organisations and (2) placements; in teaching and learning and students’ development? The general responses

Statement 1: Students who have undertaken industrial experience in some form seem generally to perform better in their final examinations than those who have not.

Statement 2: Students with industrial experience generally find it easier to obtain the kind of employment they want on graduation.

Statement 3: Placements can be an important stepping stone to professional qualification in the surveying professions as they can count towards the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors Assessment of Professional Competence (APC).

Question 2: What important changes should the University make to its induction programme to foster new staff interest in developing student experience through links with external organisations?

S1: Inclusion of sessions devoted to the role of industrial experience

S2: Make available case study material on how industry experience is dealt with in different schools in the University.

S3: Run workshops that introduce new staff to the various organisations that facilitate industry links.

Question 3: What important changes will need to happen to enable existing academic staff to engage with external organisations for the purpose of developing teaching and learning links?

S1: The distinction drawn by the University between teaching and academic enterprise can be counter productive as it compartmentalizes activities; there is a need to bridge this gap.

S2: There should be greater recognition of the importance of activities such as placement development in staff development and promotion.

S3: There should be a greater recognition of the need for resources to be allocated to develop and maintain external links.

Question 4: What should the University be doing to promote students employability and career development from within the curriculum?

S1: More emphasis on workplace skills.

S2: Make use of industry liaison committees etc. to explore key industry skills.

S3: Make greater use of Personal Development Planning as a tool for enhancing employability.

Question 5: What are the key areas to concentrate on for developing employability strategies across the University over the next five years?

S1: Ensure that placements do not become too expensive; current policy is to charge a half fee whilst some rival institutions have waived the placement fee.

S2: Make efforts to help students who need part-time time work to find employment that enhances their learning.

S3: Ensure that placements do not become subject to excessively bureaucratic procedures.

Question 6: What important changes will occur with regard to employability in the University over the next five years?

S1: Increased fees will result in a rise in students taking a part-time route to avoid debt; the potential of this for industry-based learning needs to be explored.

S2: Full-time students are likely to avoid placements as they seek to qualify as quickly as possible and keep fees to a minimum; greater attention to employability within traditional taught modules may be necessary as a consequence.

S3: Employers will increasingly look to “cherry pick” the best graduates before the final year.

Conclusions

The paper has identified the nature of the common and diversified approaches used in the University. The predominant focus of University degree programmes with external organisational work-based linkages were period placements in which the aim is to promote student learning through training in the world of work environment.

The research has offered a contribution towards cross-disciplinary collaboration and develops knowledge and understanding of the role that work-based consultancies play in enhancing learning experiences, developing professional skills, and improving employability and knowledge transfers between HE learners and workplace environments. The indications are that the approach has realised quality improvements in teaching approaches at the University of Salford and enhanced teaching and learning within the establishment.

The consultancy model of teaching and learning and employability personal development has contributed to the quality of teaching, learning and or assessment

within the two Schools in which it has operated. The approach has contributed to policy and planning in consultancy based learning and teaching by assisting tutors in their teaching and learning. It supports teaching by actively promoting innovation and flexibility in delivery and assessment. It enhances quality in application and communications and has made attempts to foster collaborative engagements in the consultancy areas across the School. It encourages and advises staff in their commitment to improve the quality and flexibility of their learning and teaching and assessment programmes. Further, it can contribute to the management, design and development of instructional materials for consultancy programmes at Salford.

It appears that employers' preferences are for graduates who have had work experience in a structured, meaningful and academically valid way. This enhances the employability status of the student. Despite this, for a variety of reasons including, the move towards top up fees, students living at home to keep expenses down, and increasing numbers of students taking up part time jobs, the traditional one-year placement is no longer an option for most students. The study found that there was a trend towards students declining placements opportunities, preferring instead to complete their degree programme in a shorter period so as to enter the job market earlier. The main thoughts of the interviewees seem to be that the best compromise would be to keep the key idea of students gaining experience in industry, making this a compulsory part of all new programmes.

Given these conclusions, there is a clear need to be more creative in engaging students in workplace based learning activities, for example either through shorter placements, consultancy type projects, multi-year projects or a combination of all three approaches. A variety of these opportunities should be incorporated into the three-year curriculum. Curriculum design should be adjusted to ensure that students receive academic credit for any such work-based activities so that they are viewed as being of equal value to other more academic based modules.

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