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Developing student's employability working with SMEs in the North West of England

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Abstract:

Problem statement/rationale, including reference to key literature:

"The Government has made it clear that we will do whatever we can to respond to the current economic challenges. Higher education can play a central role in supporting businesses and individuals with skills, advice, knowledge and know-how" (Lammy,2008,p2)

In addition to the HEFCE report cited above, numerous UK policy documents, most notably the Dearing Review (Dearing 1997) and the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006) have stressed the value of vocational education. The benefits of student placements are well established. Employers recognise the value of new temporary employees with fresh knowledge, skills and enthusiasm, typically at relatively modest salaries, who are potential future long term employees (Harris 2004). Universities and students have recognised many benefits of vocational learning and placements, with research showing students with placement experience substantially enhancing their employability (Neill and Mulholland 2003). This is particularly the case during difficult economic times (Lightfoot 2009). A number of studies have shown the benefits of placements to students (Mandilaras 2004, Rawlings et al 2005), especially the development of students' soft skills such as communication and team working skills (Hordyk 2007).

This paper describes the experience of Unite with Business project, which began in 2010, whose objective is to support Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the North West of England through the work of graduates and students. The project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is a partnership between six North West Universities. Whilst assisting the SMEs the project significantly develops the employability skills of graduates, and is a model for future collaboration and development.

Research design and methods of data collection and analysis or method inquiry:

This paper identifies a series of short case studies, showing how students/graduates have benefitted either through their experience with an SME. It discusses the specific skills they have developed, and the strengths and weaknesses of this approach looking at feedback from all stakeholders before, during and after each case.

Main findings:

- The project strongly demonstrates that the "hidden jobs market" has substantial employability opportunities for the graduate, and that the graduate/student has a lot to offer to SMEs: Higher Education is uniquely placed to connect supply and demand in this way.
- The project has been running for 18 months and noticeable patterns of demand from employers have become clear. There has been a major demand for marketing focused activity, whether this is digital marketing, design activities or web development. The majority of SME's seeking business growth will want to achieve this by finding the most cost effective means of promotion to the widest and most relevant audience.

Discussion of implications:

The paper, through its description of this project, demonstrates how the skills of graduates can achieve real economic benefit to the region. At the same time it demonstrates an effective way of developing the employability skills of our students/graduates in practice.

List of key references/resources:

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Rawlings, P., White, P. & Stephens, R. (2005) "Practice-Based Learning in Information Systems: the Advantages for Students" *Journal of Information Systems Education* 16(4), pp 455-63

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