The employability advantage: embedding skills through a university-wide language programme

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1.   Introduction

In an ever unstable job market, improving the employability skills of graduates comes very high in the priorities of languages departments. As the employment of graduates appears among the performance indicators of institutions in higher education, universities are focussing more and more upon the development of employability related skills to enhance students' prospects in the job market.

All UK universities are measured on the first jobs that their students acquire after graduation. In response to this, Coventry University implemented numerous new strategies to emphasise and stress the importance of education for employability.

This chapter will report on the Institution-Wide Language Provision (IWLP) and its explicit link to the higher education employability agenda. IWLPs typically cater for students who want to study a language alongside their degree subject in addition to, or as part of, their main degree course. Uniquely, Coventry University offers language modules to undergraduate students as part of a scheme called Add+vantage. These modules are designed to embed employability into undergraduate courses, allowing students to demonstrate language skills and formal learning when entering the graduate job market. The Add+vantage modules are taught over an eleven-week semester, with the eleventh week solely dedicated to employability.

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2.   What we did

Students at Coventry University are given the chance each year to chose a credit-bearing employability module offered as part of the Add+vantage suite of modules. These modules focus primarily on a work experience and career development activities. This provides students with a unique opportunity to enhance their knowledge, skills and qualifications within a work-focussed environment. For example, students thinking of a career in volunteering can use their chosen Add+vantage module to volunteer in the community. For those who are planning to work in international contexts, the Add+vantage language modules enable them to demonstrate their language skills to potential employers.

In order to ensure quality, consistency, and to provide strategic vision, an advisory board was established to bring together representatives from the different departments/faculties involved in the scheme to gain consensus on issues such as commissioning and decommissioning modules, timetabling, registry, quality standards and general operational challenges. Furthermore, the advisory board decides whether modules are 'fit for purpose' by assessing whether they fulfil a number of employability-focussed criteria. The modules also ease the transition from university to work.

In selecting the range of employability competencies to be developed through the Add+vantage scheme, the university has adopted this definition:

> "Employability is a set of competencies that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation(s), which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

The Add+vantage scheme offers a broad range of subject areas which are arranged in different themes. As detailed on the Coventry University's (2016) website, in the 'Global Languages' theme, students can learn French, German, Italian, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese or Portuguese. Included in 'Global Perspectives' are modules in which students learn how to do business in different parts of the world or look at intercultural communication in the global society. Under the 'Professional Development' category, modules have been created in association with local companies to give students unique industry insight and guidance for graduate recruitment. Other themes include Employer Engagement, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship, Work Experience/ Volunteering, Global Experience, Work-related Projects and Work-related Skills. The common thread is that they all develop and strengthen the skills employers are looking for and improve students' prospects of securing employment.

The languages element of the Add+vantage scheme at Coventry University is organised by the School of Humanities. This unique programme was launched in October 2006, and has greatly increased IWLP provision across the University.

Degree programmes normally require students to acquire 120 credits per academic year and ten of these must be selected from the Add+vantage suite of modules at each level. Classes are offered at absolute beginner, post-beginner and intermediate level, and dedicated business language modules are also available in French and Spanish. Students are also able to register as complete beginners at level one, two or three. The modules span 11 weeks for two hours per week and students are required to complete two in-class assessments: one in week five and the other in week ten. Students taking modules at levels two and three can use the credits to count towards their degree programmes. Classes are held in dedicated Add+vantage slots, which help to eradicate timetabling clashes, as the University stipulates that no other classes are to be scheduled for these slots. Enrolment, attendance monitoring and module changes are also centrally administered as part of the university's careers advice services.

A more recent development has seen the employability agenda more explicitly promoted by adding an extra week to the programme, in which tutors are required to encourage students to reflect upon how the module content supports and enhances career development and to deliver materials with a clear employability slant (Routes into Languages, 2015).

3.   Discussion of outcomes

Approximately 7,500 students take part in the programme which is repeated in both semesters. Of these around 3,000 choose to enrol on languages modules. Levels are explicitly mapped across to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and each module is assessed in a similar way. Spanish and French continue to attract the most students, but over the last few years interest in Mandarin, Arabic and Japanese has expanded. As the modules are credit bearing, the school is funded directly from the centre, which is certainly a major factor in securing the programme's long-term success.

The range of personal and generic competencies incorporated in the Add+vantage scheme includes problem solving, action planning and organising, written/oral communication, and questioning and listening. In addition to these, further personal competencies are developed such as decisiveness, achievement orientation, initiative (creativity), self-confidence, influencing, adaptability, and reflectiveness.

4.   Conclusion

According to The Times (2014), Coventry University has increased its reputation for students' satisfaction and has since 2014 become a preferred students' destination for the modernity of its teaching.

This cannot be entirely attributed to the success of the Add+vantage programme, but it is certainly one of the contributing factors. By participating on the Add+vantage scheme, students can develop an increased awareness of the

expectations of employers that are wider than mere academic competencies. Having the opportunity to develop comprehensive employability skills also enables students to contribute effectively in the workplace from day one or in their own business.

References and links

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