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Case Study

Embedding employability and encouraging engagement with PDP/careers: a case study focussing on law students

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Abstract

Concentrating on the second-year of a three year, qualifying law programme, this article analyses different methods for embedding both employability and personal development planning within undergraduate degree programmes. Focusing on two alternative core modules, it analyses how inter-professional collaboration can facilitate specific employability/PDP curricular interventions. In doing so, it evaluates their effectiveness and explores the potential transferability of such methods.

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Introduction

"Embedding employability... will continue to be a key priority of universities..., and employers" (HEFCE, 2011). But what exactly does this strategic cornerstone involve? Students need to develop skills not only to gain graduate employment but also to retain it, and to go on to further progress within their career. Whilst there is no definitive recipe for employability, skills such as team working, problem solving, communication and commercial awareness are clearly crucial for most roles.

There is a debate about how best to integrate employability within what the Higher Education Academy (HEA) describes as an often crowded curriculum (HEA, 2012). Whilst the HEA encourages institutions to consider a more individualised approach (HEA, 2012) whichever teaching, learning and assessment methods are adopted, their common denominator must be the encouragement of student engagement.

The second year of the law programme is a crucial stage for students because solicitors' firms often recruit two years in advance. This paper analyses and evaluates the development and effectiveness of two newly-validated second-year modules: Careers Development Learning (CDL); a core module for approximately 50 LLB Law with Criminology students, and Clinical Legal Education (CLE); a core module for approximately 180 LLB Law students.

This paper explores the rationale behind the range of specific skills-based activities which have been included and goes on to consider their effectiveness, particularly in light of the student feedback that has been provided.

The aim of this paper is to help inform the design of other curricular interventions. In particular, it considers the extent to which the teaching, learning and assessment materials have encouraged student engagement with both PDP and careers.

Time for change

Sheffield Hallam University's increased, strategic focus on employability led to a call for all departments to further develop their careers/PDP offer.

How was employability embedded within the Law programme?

As part of revalidation, the team was tasked with designing both the CLE and CDL modules "from scratch". Accordingly they devised a range of different activities to embed PDP/careers elements with specific reference to the different law and/or criminology career routes available.

The underpinning pedagogies utilised by the team were not subject-specific and can be, and have been, used across a number of different disciplines. For example, by employing The CareerEDGE Model (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007) within the development of these modules, the team made the assumption that students were gaining "employability assets" (i.e. developing their generic skills and degree subject knowledge) elsewhere in accordance with the Quality Assurance Agency's benchmark for law (The Higher Education Academy, 2006). As such, the team concentrated on including the "career development learning elements" of the CareerEDGE Model, with some consideration given to the importance of developing emotional intelligence (Whiteley, Gardner and Qualter, 2007).

The team also used the DOTS model (Watts, 2006, p.10) as a menu from which various previously tried and tested options were selected for inclusion within each of these two core modules.

On a similar note, the team felt it important to discuss their plans with careers professionals, both inside and outside of the University,² to find out what worked and what didn't in terms of careers/PDP.

As such, the team developed a variety of activities; including a series of guest speaker events which ran alongside both modules to help develop students' commercial awareness of particular career sector(s), and their motivation for achieving such career aspirations. Whilst some academics teaching on both modules were former practitioners, the team recognised the importance of inviting those currently in practice to also share their experiences with the students.

In addition, the team designed the following tasks to help develop the students' key employability skills:

² including the careers teams within Sheffield Hallam University's Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics and also the University of Bradford

- **Research Project**

Students taking the CDL module were required to undertake a Research Project in Semester One. In line with the 'opportunity awareness' aspect of the DOTS model (Dacre-Pool and Sewel, 2007), this was designed to encourage them to identify and research a specific career path with the aim of clarifying their aspirations, whether within their originally chosen career or not. The Project involved each student producing a formal report of their findings.

Key employability skills developed included: adaptability/flexibility; willingness to learn; communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences; and planning, co-ordinating and organising ability.

- **Practice Interview**

Following the established effectiveness of experiential learning to develop employability (as evidenced in a number of previous research papers including Cairns, 1996 and Avramenko, 2012), the CDL module also involved students taking part in a mock careers interview in Semester Two. Students were required to find a job advert which interested them, and use it to help them to prepare for a mock interview for that particular role. The interview was then conducted as formally and as realistically as possible.

Key employability skills developed included: imagination and creativity; adaptability and flexibility; ability to work under pressure; good oral communication; and attention to detail.

- **Simulated recruitment and selection processes**

The CLE module involved students working within small groups as 'law firms' as part of a simulated, legal practice environment. To embed employability skills within this work-based learning module, the team decided to also simulate a recruitment and selection process. Each firm was asked to advertise for a Paralegal to join their firm. This involved the students working together to write a job description and a person specification. Each firm was then invited to work as a group and apply for one of the roles which had been advertised by another firm. The completed job applications were then returned to the relevant firm so that those students within that firm could conduct a shortlisting process and provide feedback.

Unfortunately there simply wasn't the space available for the same opportunity to be provided within the 20 credit, CDL module. However the team were keen to ensure that these Law with Criminology students similarly experienced a recruitment and selection process to help them to develop their understanding of what employers are looking for within their own applications.

After discussions with the Psychology, Sociology and Politics ("PSP") careers professionals, the team noted that PSP had previously successfully devised and carried out a simulation exercise for their own students which involved pre-prepared materials, including a job advert, job description and person specification, that could similarly be used for the CDL module.

Both the CLE and CDL students also took part in mock assessment centre group exercises (The University of Aberdeen, 1999) where they were divided into 2 groups. Each group then observed the other and provided feedback.

Key employability skills developed included: imagination/creativity; working in a team; ability to manage others; good oral communication; attention to detail; time-management; assumption of responsibility and for making decisions; and planning, co-ordinating and organising ability.

- **Self-assessment**

CLE students were asked to complete a SWOT analysis: a structured planning method used to evaluate their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats with regards to their career and professional aims. Firstly, they completed an analysis on themselves. Secondly, they asked someone they trusted to complete another analysis on them.

In a similar vein, CDL students were asked to complete an online assessment designed to match their interests with specific job roles (University of Kent, no date provided).

Key employability skills developed included: adaptability/flexibility; independent working/autonomy; communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences; and attention to detail.

- **Personal Development Planning**

Both sets of students on each module completed a personal development plan as part of their assessment. They were encouraged to use the template provided to help them to construct a range of short, medium and long-term SMART goals: variously described but often understood as a way of developing goals that are specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-related.

Key employability skills developed included: generic skills: adaptability/flexibility; independent working/autonomy; attention to detail; time management; and planning, co-ordinating and organising ability.

- **CV**

Both the CLE and CDL students were asked to develop their CV using guidelines around content, layout, priority, accuracy, and quality. They were provided with suggested resources for CV-development but were also encouraged to find their own resources. Students were able to choose from a range of different methods for improving their CV; for example, they could make an appointment with the Faculty Employment Adviser and/or their Academic Adviser. Where applicable, they could also seek feedback from their Career Mentor as part of the University's Scheme. Peer-feedback could also be used and a suggested template was provided for recording this. Whichever method(s) they chose, they had to ensure that the progress that they had made in developing their CV was evidenced within their portfolio.

Key employability skills developed included: imagination/creativity; willingness to learn; communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences; and attention to detail.

- **Reflection**

Finally, both sets of students were required to reflect on their experiences throughout each module to help them to identify action points for further skills and careers development.

Key employability skills developed included: willingness to learn; attention to detail.

How did it go?

The team had carefully designed the careers/PDP elements of both programmes to account for a range of different learning styles and to acknowledge the fact that students could be at various stages of their career planning. Student feedback illustrated how much they

appreciated this. By way of an example, students were asked to rate the different methods of delivery used on the CDL module in terms of usefulness for either their assessment and/or their learning/understanding. The following table (Figure 1) illustrates just how much students valued the variety of teaching and learning methods comprised within the CDL module. As can be seen most methods were scored as a 3 or 4 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 representing the highest level of satisfaction.

Figure 1: Student feedback on the following methods of delivery in terms of usefulness for either their assessment and/or their learning/understanding

	One (poor)	Two	Three	Four (excellent)	No response
<u>Method</u>					
Lectures			7	6	
Seminar/workshops			8	5	
Online materials		1	9	3	
Individual tutorials		2	1	10	
Practice Interview	1	1	4	7	
Tour of Careers Centre		1	6	1	5
Guest speakers		1	7	5	

NB. In Figure 1 'lectures' and 'seminars' are self-explanatory; 'Tour of the Careers Centre' refers to a guided tour of the University Careers Centre, including an overview of the available resources; and 'guest speakers' refers to extra-curricular talks, involving professionals from a range of occupations discussing what their work involved and their advice for students.

The team had also previously noted a tendency for some students to view career planning as something which could wait until their final year, or even after graduation. All of these different careers/PDP tasks had therefore been carefully sequenced in such a way so as to maximise student engagement from the start of the module, and to develop students' understanding of not only the tasks commonly found in most recruitment and selection processes, but also the importance of familiarising themselves with such processes early in their course to help maximise their employability opportunities.

Undertaking tasks such as the research project early on in the CDL module really helped students to prioritise their career planning and many acknowledged this in their module feedback; for example:

At the very beginning... I struggled to understand the relevance of the module, in relation to the rest of my university modules. I especially found it difficult to consider what the module could really teach me, as all the other compulsory law modules on the university course are specific areas of law... I believe that the module, especially the research project was a pivotal point in my time at university so far.

The team was also keen to provide students with the opportunity to explore the career aims identified from their research project in context through the guest speaker programme referred to previously. Student feedback on this particular aspect included:

I found the careers talks the most interesting aspect of this module....the guest speakers were enjoyable and useful for both the assessment and life skills.

Whilst most of the tasks on the CDL module were popular, one particular aspect of note is the practice interview for which student feedback was polarised. Some students were nervous beforehand and a few seemed a little distressed during the process itself. On reflection, the team believes that this may have been because, whilst they tried to make the interviews as authentic as possible, from the initial introduction and handshake to the close, some students did not find such "acting" easy. Perhaps this was compounded by the fact that the interviewers were members of the careers/teaching teams and therefore students already knew their interviewer in a different capacity.

It is perhaps worth noting that the team had taken the decision not to assess the practice interview because the CDL module is only worth 20 credits and its assessment already included five tasks geared to encourage understanding of the career management process from start to finish. With hindsight though, the team would have included this practice interview activity as part of the module assessment, particularly given the amount of preparation which the students were required to undertake beforehand. Whilst the content, structure and requirements of each job advert and therefore each interview would clearly be different, students would be assessed against more generic criteria such as eye contact and communication skills. If the team do decide to assess these interviews, then mindful of the limited modular resource hours available, they would prepare video-recorded examples of both successful and unsuccessful interviews. These would be made available via the online module support site to help support students with their preparation.

Regarding the CLE module, the key career management task was the simulated recruitment and selection process. This was designed in response to student feedback from

the first year the module ran that the careers/PDP elements of the module felt like an 'add-on' rather than an integral part of the module.

Whilst most organisations do recruit using a job description, person specification and application form process, the team recognised that not all law firms adopt this process. Nevertheless, it was thought that including this element would be useful to help students understand the skills, experience and knowledge that employers are looking for and develop their ability to tailor their own applications accordingly.

Unfortunately, whilst a substantial amount of preparation had gone into this process, it was not as successful as the team had originally hoped. A number of factors affected student engagement. For example, timetabling issues meant that not all of the students within each firm were together to begin the task within the allocated workshop time and this led to some confusion as to what was required. Also, if the team were to include this particular aspect again, they would encourage more input from the rest of the teaching team from the outset in the development of such activities. (Because the teaching team was not finalised until relatively close to the module start date, this was unfortunately impossible in that particular year).

Also, when designing the task, one of the team's main concerns was staff-resourcing. Whilst each firm was asked to devise their own job advert for a Paralegal to join their firm and submit a group application for another firm's job, in an ideal world to help ensure as authentic an experience as possible, the team would have liked for each student to produce their own individual job application. This would help them to recognise the amount of research and preparation work that is needed to complete a successful, tailored application, and would have proved a more beneficial resource from which to develop their own actual applications for graduate employment. However this was unfortunately impossible from a logistics point of view, particularly given that there were 180 students on the module. As a result, this left some students feeling uncomfortable because they were asked to work as a group on a task which they would usually complete individually.

Conclusion

Whilst there are clear points for future development, overall the methods used to embed employability within both modules have, overall, proved successful. Students felt that they benefitted from the insight provided into the importance of careers/PDP and were able to

further develop their proficiency in completing career management tasks.

Since the inception of both modules, the team have noticed increased student awareness of and engagement with the Careers Service. In particular the assessed CV task (included within both modules) was designed to help provide a catalyst to encourage students to use the Careers Service where they might not have done so before. It worked! The team found that after making initial contact, students became more confident in requesting help with other recruitment aspects such as practice interviews.³ The team felt that this aspect of assessment was particularly beneficial for those students who weren't previously aware of what support the Careers Service could offer them or the range of activities available to help them to develop their careers further.

One of the key points that the team has recognised from their experience of these modules is the need for careers/PDP elements to form part of the core curriculum and to be assessed where appropriate. It is recognised that approaching the elements in this way has encouraged all students to engage with careers/PDP when they might not have done so otherwise. The majority of students also agree with this approach.⁴

Whilst it is important to encourage students at this level to engage with these aspects, the team also recognise the need for a spiralled curriculum (Harden and Stamper, 1999) to ensure that students develop their understanding of the importance and need for careers/PDP throughout their course and beyond. As such, other complementary modules have been and are being devised, developed and rolled out at the other levels of the Law programme to help provide a seamless thread of careers/PDP teaching, learning and assessment throughout.

Transferability to other disciplines

Following their experience, the authors believe that aspects of this approach could be easily transferred to help develop employability within other HE disciplines. For example, the employability pedagogies adopted have transferability potential for any subject area. Also, when consulting underpinning theory, it's helpful for programme designers to consider what particular employers are looking for from specific sectors when selecting from the menu of activities available. The authors would also particularly champion the use of experiential

³ For the academic year 2012-3, 17 appointments attended by LLB Law with Criminology students. For the academic year 2013-4, 40 appointments were attended, representing a 135% increase.

⁴ 64% of respondents selected the option of career/PDP elements being included within a separately assessed module.

learning where appropriate. Whilst such activities can appear challenging to all involved, the authors have found that the benefits far outweigh such concerns, as long as sufficient support and resource is available

The authors would also strongly suggest that curriculum design should closely involve collaboration with careers professionals as experience has found their specific experience and professional knowledge invaluable in embedding employability efficiently and effectively. As a central resource, the Careers Service is ideally placed to provide an overview of other initiatives across the University. As such, close collaboration can be key in helping to encourage engagement in this area.

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