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The Medium is the Message: Taking a Career Development Approach to Curriculum Design and Delivery at UWS

In December 2016, two esteemed members of the career development community began their well-deserved retirement. As Janet Moffett and Graham Allan passed the baton to us in January 2017, we were faced with the daunting task of, as they had put it, “going for it” and “making the programme our own”. We were very lucky to have inherited a programme that had run successfully for several decades, but to “make it our own” meant that we would have to decide how best to conceptualise the challenge before us. We brought a broad range of expertise to our new roles; most recently from HE research and teaching (albeit in a different field), and in equality and diversity policy development and practice. However, what we had in common, and what came to inform the programme developments we have instigated thus far, was a commitment to taking a “career development approach” to all that we did.

What might such an approach look like in the context of the development of a postgraduate programme of professional education? How could we utilise our broader career development and guidance expertise to inform our approach as professional practice educators? How could we structure our teaching and programme delivery so that it met the best practice values that we (and our students) should aim for as professional practitioners? These were the key questions that directed our activity and provided a focus and rationale for programme developments.

We began by considering two key issues. The first was how we might explicitly conceptualise and communicate our own role to reflect our focus on the broader development of our students and our subject area. We positioned ourselves as “leaders of learning”, rather than as “teachers”, “lecturers” or “former careers advisers.” This seemed to us to better express the relationship that we wanted to develop with our students, as well helping us to conceptualise something of the complex nature of the relationship between teaching, research and practice, and our own role in articulating the links between these activities. It also dovetailed neatly with our institution’s focus on inquiry-based learning pedagogies and the development of an ambitiously broad range of graduate attributes. Our second consideration was to attend to broader issues of inclusion, and to what mattered to our students at this stage in the development of *their* professional identity. Taking a career development approach meant taking seriously our students’ prior experiences, their motivations and values and their current circumstances.

This focus led us to review our programme infrastructure, and we were able, with the support of our School’s Senior Leadership Team and our administrative colleagues, to trial a “family-friendly” timetabling model. Many of our students return to full-time postgraduate study with caring responsibilities, and we were aware that facilitating the engagement we hoped for would depend on getting the timetable right for these students. We dropped Mondays and Fridays, which are often holiday and INSET days, from our teaching schedule, instigated online sessions for School holiday weeks and timetabled activity within the boundaries of a typical primary school day. The feedback from students thus far has been extremely positive and engagement has been exemplary. “Family-friendly” timetabling has also helped students who have to combine work and study, and will, we hope, facilitate engagement with additional work-based learning opportunities. We have tried to ensure that we replicate this model for our distance learners when they come onto campus for module workshop days. A broad inclusion focus also informed a review of our use of the university’s

Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle. All six taught modules in our programme are now structured to have a common format/layout in Moodle, integrating resources into each of five units in each module. We have trialled the use of audio recordings to accompany PowerPoint presentations, primarily to support distance learners, including our Masters Research students, who work independently for the most part. Given the positive feedback on these developments, we intend to rollout audio recording across the programme in the coming session. This will also benefit attending students who may need additional preparation and/or revision of material.

Our broad career development approach informed a review of module content and assessment practice, supported by the CDI, our external examiners and our School's Creative and Academic Development Consultancy, with input from our partners at Skills Development Scotland. We were mindful of the need to move beyond a narrow "transferrable skills" approach to employability, towards a "professional identity" approach which more closely resembles the approach taken by career development professionals. Arguably, a key challenge for all practice educators is to balance professional socialisation with academic socialisation; it is important to scaffold students' learning and development in both realms and to ensure that they are able to make sense of the myriad ways in which their academic and professional identities interact. We wanted our students to begin to think, and act, like professionals from Day One, and to commit to supporting one another as a group. Our induction sessions were designed to replicate the approach to group work that we expect our students to develop and apply. Personal tutoring and feedback sessions have been "reimagined" as one-to-one coaching sessions, and we hope to develop peer coaching in the coming session. Students' reflections on their academic and practice experiences are now linked explicitly to the UWS graduate attributes framework, ensuring that students have a vocabulary with which to express their academic, professional and personal development that is applicable across a broad range of contexts going forward.

Extending external engagement and meaningful partnership working has been key to our approach. We have been able to develop key strategic partnerships with two local secondary schools (Gleniffer High School and St. Andrew's Academy, both in Paisley), enabling our practice learning to take place in authentic settings. We have also developed a range of assessment strategies including, in our Labour Market Studies module for example, the development by students of an academic poster, which can be used as a resource by professional practitioners, and which foregrounds the application of theoretical knowledge and research findings. We have integrated input from a wide variety of external experts, including our CDI moderator, into module delivery, as well as instigating a Seminar Series, inviting experts in issues of inclusion relating to career and employment to speak to our students and the wider university community. This trimester, we delivered our first "placement preparation week" with significant input from our partners at Skills Development Scotland. This included a LinkedIn session, facilitated by our colleague from the UWS Careers and Skills Team, where our full-time students developed a LinkedIn profile enhanced by a professionally taken photograph. These "external" sessions are video-recorded wherever possible for the benefit of our distance learners. We are currently working with the Higher Education Academy to develop a practice guide for embedding equality and inclusion in the curriculum based upon our experiences so far.

For us, the medium really is the message. Furthermore taking a career development approach to programme and curriculum design and delivery has highlighted the expertise that career development professionals can bring to bear in a wide range of learning environments.

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