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Taking Work Experience to the Curriculum

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Leeds Metropolitan University is a large institution with a diverse range of courses ranging from Playwork to Information Management. It has a tradition of strong vocational programmes such as Physiotherapy and Dietetics; courses which incorporate work experience or placement learning as central to the course. The institution is located in a large urban area with all the associated opportunities for work experience this brings, though it is contiguous with Leeds University and there are two other universities and several colleges operating higher education programmes within 12 miles; within a 30 mile radius there are six other large universities. This sheer volume of students looking for relevant work or work experience within a narrow geographical area means some are unsuccessful.

Work experience is increasingly recognised as one of the main requirements of employers (BIS, 2009; Mason *et al.*, 2006) and this is particularly true in the competitive media sector. Applicants to the area find that unpaid work experience is often a requirement of entry level/non-graduate jobs and that accessing even unpaid work experience is difficult without contacts. These issues disadvantage certain student

groups more than others; for example, students who have caring responsibilities, who do not have financial support from family, and students who must work in order to fund their study. To overcome these issues we developed an innovative module on our BA (Hons) course in Media and Popular Culture.

The BA (Hons) in Media and Popular Culture is a non-vocational programme, which covers the social, economic and political aspects of media and culture, having more in common with traditional arts programmes than media training courses; however, many entrants to the course express an interest in working in practical aspects of the media, particularly in television and print journalism and film making. Therefore, specific projects in the earlier parts of the course develop the practical skills students need and allow them to experience the practicalities of work in this area, but do not provide access to work experience.

In 2003 a team of staff met to address this issue, incorporating members of the course team and representatives from the Employability Office (a cross-university department tasked with

embedding employability in the curriculum), along with a selection of media employers. From this work the Media Professionals module was developed.

The Media Professionals module incorporates three main strands of work for the student:

- a group project run by a media professional;
- an analysis of their chosen career and how they are to enter it;
- a reflective log of the process.

The group projects aim to simulate the benefits of work experience closely; students visit workplaces, make contacts and build their networks. Students also develop work skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving, which are transferable to all areas of the media as well as to wider graduate employers. They also have the opportunity to experience a career with the benefits of an experienced professional currently working in that area. These media professionals act as mentors, taking groups of up to 25 students. These are subdivided into groups of approximately five and are given projects similar to those they would experience in the workplace; for example, the TV group was run by two BBC documentary makers who asked students to prepare an eight-minute documentary within BBC guidelines, with the content (though not presentation) at broadcast quality. Assessment of this element was via a group presentation to employers, members of the course

team and peers. The standard of work has been consistently high, with some of the journalism work resulting in publication in the media professional publications.

The second module element was to prepare an analysis of a personal career strategy (PCS). Students were asked to select a career after using an interest inventory, and via primary and secondary research, to evaluate whether it matched their skills, interests and personal circumstances. Assessment was via a written report incorporating a CV and personal action plan for entering this area of work. Completion of this element was a highly reflective process for many students, making them reconsider career choices which they had made or focus their vague occupational ideas. One student commented

[after doing this work] I know that I really don't want to be a producer now. I hadn't thought about moving away, and I've got a life. I can't work all those hours.

The final element, which is assessed after the others, is a reflective log of the process. Students are asked to submit this two weeks after the other deadlines to allow them to reflect on the whole process. Many students focus on the learning involved in the assessment activities as well as throughout the module.

Feedback on the module has been highly positive. The following comments from students emphasise their learning:

The 3-part PCS/workbook/ presentation – fantastic. I personally found a real career opportunity in the PCS module. THANKS.

This module as a whole was insightful, relevant and practical. It woke me up to the fact that I will have to actually use this degree, and that I need to realistically start considering career options.

Feedback from external examiners has also been positive:

I thought the PCS was an excellent idea and was impressed with how the students had researched their area of employment, evaluated it and linked their own preparation and skills to employment criteria.

Analysis of the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education statistics has shown a substantial improvement in the type and level of work being achieved by recent graduates from the course.

Practically this is a difficult module to administer as there are many elements and many stakeholders; however, the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. The media professionals return to participate each year owing to the personal satisfaction they gain from this work.

References

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About the author

Laura Dean is Head of Employability at Leeds Metropolitan University. This is a cross-university role, embedding employability within the curriculum via consultancy, auditing, staff development, module development and resource creation. Laura is an organisational psychologist by training and has particular interests in the use of psychometric testing to develop students' self awareness and in the involvement of employers in curriculum development and delivery.