

## “Employer Insights”: a case of embedding employability in the curriculum

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### Introduction

This paper will report on an initiative designed to embed employability in the marketing curriculum. Following a brief overview of literature, the initiative “Employer Insights” will be explained and initial evaluation will be presented.

### Embedding employability in the curriculum

At one level, many of the skills and competences developed as part of a degree programme (often described as “key skills” such as numeracy, communication, working with others etc) will make students more employable. In addition, broader based qualities relating to values, intellectual rigour and engagement all combine to make graduates attractive to employers (Pegg *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, Yorke and Knight (2007) point out that good learning equals good employability and that the qualities sought by employers (e.g., taking the initiative and the willingness to persevere with difficult tasks) are also those that are key in the acquisition of subject knowledge.

This move away from employability as simply a set of skills and competences towards a wider set of abilities related to reflection and articulation of learning (Pegg *et al.*, 2012) is seen across much of the literature and models have been developed to explain what employers are looking for as a way of encouraging and guiding employability developments both within and alongside the curriculum. Knight and Yorke’s (2003) USEM model is often referred to, identifying understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs and meta-cognition as key aspects of what makes a graduate employable. Reflection and meta-cognition have also been identified by Junghagen (2005) as a way of achieving the higher order thinking tasks sought by employers. The key to such employability initiatives is to ensure that the link between students’ experiences and their employability is made explicit. To assist this, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) developed a practical model of employability, identifying how aspects of a student’s experiences at university could combine to make them more employable. Via reflection and evaluation, the model suggests that students are able to develop self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence, leading to an increase in their employability.

Discussion so far has focussed on “deeply embedded” employability which relies on being fully explained to students for them to appreciate the benefits. The initiative under discussion in this paper: “Employer Insights” was developed to be a much more overt contribution to employability.

### “Employer Insights” explained

In brief, “Employer Insights” involves small groups of second-year undergraduate students arranging a visit to a marketing communications practitioner in the workplace to film a short interview. Using a pre-agreed discussion guide, students interrogate practitioners about current developments in marketing communications. They also ask for advice on securing a job in marketing communications. Films are then shown to the rest of the class to stimulate discussion and debate.

“Employer Insights” was designed to link theory from the classroom with the practical realities of the workplace, something which Peterson and Dover (2014) have identified as a challenge. It was also developed with the objective of overcoming the problem that many undergraduates have limited insight into the types of careers open to them or the skills needed to succeed in marketing, an observation which has also been noted by Freudenberg *et al.* (2009). This is especially true if the students are the first in their family to go to university, without a ready network of industry contacts.

### Evaluating “Employer Insights”

From the tutor's perspective, "Employer Insights" has been a huge success and succeeded in bringing the practical issues faced by marketers into the classroom, thereby keeping the curriculum up to date. The most rewarding outcome has been the visible excitement expressed by the students as they introduce their films to the rest of the class. Interviewed employers (very credible sources in the students' eyes) have stressed the importance of networking, work experience, having a positive attitude and attention to detail when seeking employment.

Formal evaluation of the initiative has been carried out with qualitative depth interviews and pre and post-initiative questionnaires to all students on the module (n=38). Questions focussed on careers related activities already undertaken and explored the types of marketing roles they already knew about. Using a matched sample, this was then re-issued at the end of the module to identify any shifts.

Pre and post questionnaire findings indicated a shift from very little understanding of the roles available in marketing communications to a new knowledge of specific roles such as "account executive" and "media planner" suggesting a definite improvement in understanding. There was also a vast improvement in the level of reported activity in relation to obtaining careers advice.

Qualitative interviews also suggested some very positive views:

*"He gave us so much information...it really inspired me to just be like him...he gave us tips on how to be different, it was really helpful...."*

*"This was the first time we ever had something like this and it was really, really helpful....it showed us not only the trends in marketing but we actually got to meet a practitioner who was so knowledgeable..... now I have a much better idea of areas I want to go into".....*

The value of "Employer Insights" comes from the interview itself but also from the classroom discussions afterwards. As Cranmer (2006) notes, the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion about work experience can be more important than the work experience itself. Whilst "Employer Insights" is not work experience, the initiative does provide exposure to the workplace and enables students to reflect on what employers have said, comparing views on what makes a student stand out at an interview or application.

## Conclusions

Whilst it is important to embed employability into the curriculum via the development of skills, competences and broader based qualities such as reflection and meta-cognition, it can also be beneficial to incorporate some activities explicitly linked to the workplace. In addition to keeping the curriculum up to date, such initiatives can help to develop students' understanding of the types of roles available as well as inspiring them about their future. In the words of the conference, such initiatives can "furnish students with the knowledge and skills to transform their world".

## References

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