**Discussion Paper**

**Developing and Engaging in Collaborative Networks to support student employability and work placements – examples from a local, national and international perspective.**

**Abstract**

This paper presents a personal account of becoming actively engaged in networks to support student employability and work placements. In particular, it will look at strategies for developing networks that are sustainable and will provide examples from an institutional, national and international context. Examples will be drawn from an institutional level by looking at University projects funded to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning linked to employability and future professions. The paper explores the challenges in developing support networks for practitioners involved in these teaching and learning projects, which deals with such areas as integrating volunteering into the curriculum, employer engagement and being a UK partner in an international comparative research study looking at the psychological benefits of placement in preparing student for life and work. At a national level, the role of the UK national organisation (ASET) in supporting members by organising and facilitating activities such as conferences, networks and special interest groups will be discussed. My particular interest is how a UK (or other national) network can develop and grow international links, and how to encourage more international collaboration. Finally, a look at how to make the most out of connections across the world that a forum like WACE provides, and which can assist in developing links with conference attendees to form informal support and information networks.

220 words

**Introduction / Background**

At the University of Huddersfield our strapline is ‘Inspiring tomorrow’s professionals.’ Together with our vision ‘to be an inspiring, innovative University of international renown.’ Our strategy map guides us on this journey with one of our aims ‘to produce enterprising and employable graduates'. The university is fully committed to work placements, and supports this by offering students a 'fee free’ third year in industry should they choose to take a four year sandwich degree. Embedded within our strategy map is our teaching and learning strategy. We have a Teaching and Learning institute to support the implementation of the strategy. The institute has three main priority areas:

* assessment and feedback, to students,
* e-learning and the efficient and effective use of resources,
* employability and connections to professions

**Previous Work**

The Institute has built on the successful work of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund initiatives which included a wide range of projects. The outcomes of these innovation projects were presented at WACE (Ward and Gaffikin 2009a). These projects included transitions from school from university including peer assisted learning, and student library and IT mentors, research into the ‘Xbox generation’, transitions for music students, and learning styles on a foundation course. Other projects looked at interactions and partnerships with external organisations including employer engagement particularly in computing and engineerting, networks primarily in the arts and volunteering in the wider community. A key project running at this phase was Student Placement Journeys (Ward and Gaffikin 2009b). This video project followed 14 students on their placement journeys. These included films before placements were due to start. At the midpoint on employers premises with the views of employers. Finally, towards the end of the final year, reflections on the placement process alongside tutors. It was an amazing opportunity to watch the students develop and grow during their placements.

**Literature Review**

The UK is undergoing massive change in the Higher Education Sector. In May, 2010 the government changed from Labour to an Alliance of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Large fiscal deficits ensured that whichever government was elected serious cut backs in public spending would need to be undertaken. This coincided with a review of Student Tuition fees undertaken by Lord Browne (Browne, 2010). He recommends a change in student funding and highlights the need to, ‘providing students with clearer information about employment outcomes will close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need.’ Furthermore work by the UK Commission on Employment and Skills (UKCES, 2010) suggests that the UK’s comparative advantage in the future will be defined by high performing, high value added sectors.The Browne Review further developed the need for Higher Level Skills in the UK economy as discussed by Leitch, (Treasury 2006). How students benefit from work placements, but also balance their need to earn extra income from part- time jobs is discussed by (Harvey 2006). This has been updated by (Jensen 2009) who states that work experience really does matter in this job market. The support offered by employers is discussed by CERI at Michigan State University (Chao 2007) suggests that young people seek out mentors throughout their lives, particularly at key transition stages like a first job or work placement.

**Current Work**

Teaching and Learning Innovation Projects are supported by the Teaching and Learning Institute at the University of Huddersfield. Whilst the projects support the three main theme areas, this paper will look at those supporting employability and links to the professions. The UK government a Conservative and Liberal Alliance has put at the heart of its agenda the ‘Big Society’ (Office 2011). A project ‘Citizenship in Communities’ seeks to mainstream volunteering and active citizenship within Politics degree student expectations for work skills whilst also enhancing the University’s established reputation as a key institution in local and regional civil society. In a further project, how to develop an effective e-portfolio system for students is considered. In particular what technology is necessary and how to get students to engage? The benefits of building portfolios in both tradition web and mobile Smartphone platforms are considered.

The University of Huddersfield is also home to the Penfield Virtual Hospital. A series of anominised case studies, guide students through practical problems relating to real cases. The idea was further developed by the Law department who are developing a virtual solicitors practice.

At one of our smaller campuses the challenges are working with employers are taken a step further in Employability challenge. The challenge is to ask employers to tell us what they think are the skills gaps of our students, and then challenge them to make a contribution towards closing the gaps. For example an architect might choose to show students around his office. A journalist may get shadow students on an assignment.

**How do we support innovation projects?**

Our experience managing innovation projects suggests that building support for a community of practitioners is very important. Each cohort of projects typically consists of 8-20 projects. Our first aim is to ensure that the projects know about each other and the central support provided. We host three Inspire sessions a year to which all project members are invited. Typically the first session will be about getting to know what the projects do. Each project will pitch a short presentation about what they hope to get out of the project. The other projects can watch and question. This allows the projects to look for linkages and potential partnerships. The middle session is likely to be about how to evaluate and disseminate your projects. Previous projects are invited to share their experiences. The final session is about sustainability and making use of the projects. This sense of community provides projects with an infrastructure. Communications within the projects also take place on the website and through messaging technologies such as yammer.

**The National Perspective**

Within the UK there are a number of bodies who support placement professionals. Perhaps the most active is the Association for Sandwich Education and Training (ASET), which has been an active for over 25 years. ASET was originally set up to support staff that ran sandwich degree programmes (third year in industry out of a four year degree). Its strap line is ‘Integrating Work and Learning’, to be more representative of the huge range of work integrated learning options available in the UK. More recently its focus has refined further and become known as ‘The Placement and Employability Professional’s Network’. (ASET 2011). I have been attending ASET events since 2005, and was elected onto the Executive Committee (effectively the Board) in 2010. ASET supports in members in a variety of ways. First and foremost is the annual conference. Where best practice is discussed and networks both formal and informal are supported. Conference papers similar to those at WACE are also available and can be found on the website.

A range of other staff development events are also offered. Recently the Health and Safety of Work placements course has proved to be very popular. ASET publish their own guides, such as Health and Safety for student Work placements (ASET 2010). Their list of titles includes: good practice work placements / work based learning, managing placements on-line, e-portfolios and experience based learning. The staff development programmes puts members in touch with each other. Recently a Practice and Research Network has been established. Practitioners and academics interested in work based learning have a chance to met each other and share their research findings. Recently the group decided to establish a research internship for a student to investigate a topic of interest on work based learning.

Special interest groups have also been formed. I am leading one on European and International Placements. This has led to enormous interest within the national community. In particular we are looking to convene a group of experts who can share their knowledge with others. Our first meeting is in April 2011, so hopefully there will be more to report in June.

**International Perspective**

I have found that there are great benefits from interacting with associations such as ASET and WACE. Firstly the chance to meet others from around the world and share experiences. There is much commonality in our approaches. The informal networking and conferences give a chance to look at innovative models worldwide. These are some of the benefits that I have gained from being involved in WACE.

**International Research -** Through WACE I became interested in the International Research project hosted by the University of Waterloo. We are now involved in international research. ‘Are placement students better psychologically prepared for life and work? An International Comparative Study’. This international research collaboration is looking at if there are significant psychological outcome differences between students who pursue work integrated learning and those who pursue a traditional (full-time) programme. The project is being initially funded through our University’s Teaching and Learning Innovation Grant (see above). It was through contacts made at WACE that this project looked appealing.

**Institutional Visits** – I have hosted visitors from partner organisations exploring whether placement exchange is beneficial to our institutions. This provides an excellent opportunity for partnering. These contacts can also be developed into networks which make it possible to apply for larger educational research grants.

**Secondments / Sabbaticals** - Finally I was recently contacted by a colleague requesting a secondment to our University. This is potentially a great honour and excellent chance for international collaboration.

**International Comparisons** - through my contacts at WACE, CAFCE (The Canadian Association) and ACEN (Australia). I was able to compile a short document exploring the different business / non for profit models that organisations can use to support their members.

**Conclusions / Implications**

This paper has discussed how supportive networks can be sued to support staff interested din supporting work integrated learning in a variety of settings. Examples have been drawn from institutional, national and international level. It is hoped these will support others considering how to develop and support networks. The paper has shown that there are many ways of developing and engaging in your own networks. The implications are a better informed world network.

**References – note all weblinks need adding.**

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