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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.

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 of Huddersfield is one of the Top Ten providers of Sandwich Education (one year work placement as part of a four year degree) in the UK. Our strategy aims include 'to produce employable and enterprising graduates'. We are committed to work placements to such an extent that they are 'fee free'. We have a huge range of vocational courses and our scholarly courses also contain strong work integrated learning components.

Embedded within our strategy map is our teaching and learning strategy(University of Huddersfield, 2008). 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

In this paper, the focus will be on projects related to the employability theme even though the Institute supports projects working in the other areas as well.

Relevant Literature

The literature to support this paper comes from a variety of sources. Key areas include UK government's employability agenda particularly with respect to higher level skills,

employability and how the HE sector can support this. Additionally the benefits of work placements are discussed along with how student now combine work and study.

The UK is undergoing massive change in the Higher Education Sector. In May, 2010 the government changed from Labour to a Coalition Government consisting of the Conservatives and the 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. He recommends a change in student funding and highlights that ‘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’ (Browne, 2010). Browne says these skills are becoming increasingly important and builds on the need for Higher Level Skills in the UK economy as discussed by Lord Leitch, (HM Treasury, 2006). As well as the policy drivers, there are the views of students themselves. How students benefit from work placements, but also balance their need to earn extra income from part- time jobs is discussed by Harvey (Harvey, 2006). He finds examples of very diverse world of work and study. For example a student as a drug rehabilitation worker, finds that she meets her ‘clients’ in the betting shop where she has a part-time job. Yet Jensen (Jensen, 2009) concludes that work placements really are an important way for students to find jobs.

Building Upon Strong Foundations

The Institute is building 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 conference (Ward & Gaffikin, 2009a). These projects helped our students to attain graduate-level skills, to position themselves in the community, industry and workplace of the future and to become more creative ‘thinkers’. One key project

running at this phase was Student Placement Journeys(Ward & Gaffikin, 2009b). This video project followed 14 students on their placement journeys: before, during and after year long sandwich work placements. The first films were shot before placement. The second at a midpoint on placement, filmed at the employers premises alongside employers. Finally, on return to University, towards the end of the final year, the whole placement year was reflected upon by both the student and work placement tutor. It was an amazing opportunity to watch the students develop and grow during their placements. The resources are available on the web and continue to be used by placement offices.

Institutional Perspective: Innovation Projects

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'. An initiative designed to empower communities, re-distribute power and foster a culture of volunteering (UK Cabinet Office, 2011). A project called 'Citizenship in Communities' seeks to build a community of citizens and learners that connects the University to wider society and allows politics students to broaden their learning experience and academic research skills through linking theory with practice. The key aims are to build on existing strong links with local government, schools and third sector agencies to develop networks facilitating employability and civil society. It seeks to promote greater social responsibility through volunteering and similar schemes, whilst also enhancing employability skills and the student experience.

Another project, joins partners from around the globe in exploring if there are significant psychological outcome differences between students who pursue work integrated learning

and those who pursue a traditional (full-time) programme. Eight psychological factors related to work will be compared. The Principal Investigator (Drysdale et al., 2009) found that research in this area was virtually non-existent and wanted to redress this. The project presented at WACE and asked for partner contributors. We now have funding to join the project and carry this exciting collaborative research.

At one of our satellite campuses the challenges of working with employers are taken a step further in 'Employability Challenge', another innovation project. Specific skill areas that are key to employability have been identified:

- Commercial awareness & work-readiness
- Entrepreneurship
- Networking and collaborating with others
- Creativity, innovation and risk taking
- Self management and building confidence
- Project management and problem solving

Employers are asked to consider areas of their work where such skills are demonstrated. For example, they may be able to describe a project they are currently undertaking that has required them to take risks. The Challenge will then be for them to consider how they might convey that experience to undergraduates, and to commit to delivering an Employability Challenge Session as part of the students' skills curriculum. The format of the session will be determined by the employer as some may wish to deliver a formal presentation whereas others would prefer an informal talk with smaller groups.

How do we support innovation projects?

Our experience managing innovation projects suggests that building support for a community of practitioners is very important. Every year about 10 projects receive funding to carry out innovative teaching and learning activities. Our first aim is to ensure that the projects know about each other and the central support that we can provide, such as support with evaluation design. To ensure this, we organise three development sessions a year to which all project members are invited. The sessions are a way of developing a sense of community and to provide project with an infrastructure. Typically, the first session will be about getting to know what the projects do and each project will pitch a short presentation about the aims and objectives of the project. The other projects can then get a better idea of the proposed activities and a chance to ask questions. This allows the projects to look for linkages and potential partnerships. The middle session aims to be more activity focused and the theme depends on what challenges may be or has been encountered by project. This could include group activities around how to evaluate and disseminate projects. Previous projects are invited to share their experiences. Generally, the final session is about sustainability and exploring how the project outcomes can be mainstreamed or shared.

The challenges the Institute team has encountered are getting projects to recognise where they could work together, to share information and make use of already existing expertise.

To make sure that information about the aims and objectives of each project is accessible, project leads are asked for a short paragraph and image/graphic to describe the project and this is then made available on a central website. The Institute team also wanted to have a way to develop communications between the projects and we are currently using a messaging technology called Yammer (it is like Twitter only with limits to access), which has enabled us to set up a private group where only the project teams are invited members. Yammer is also

used by the Institute team to highlight any relevant items such as call for papers and conferences.

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 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 its 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. <http://www.asetonline.org>

Furthermore, a Practice and Research Network has been established where 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.

ASET has also set up special interest groups and I am leading one on European and International Placements. This has led to enormous interest within the national community. In

particular it has highlighted that whilst there are pockets of excellence, there is a knowledge gap in terms of both strategic and operational management of international placements, and also in the operational management. The first meeting of our expert discussion group takes place shortly. So hopefully there will be much to report.

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 are 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 contacts made at WACE I became interested in the International Research project hosted by the University of Waterloo. We are now involved in an international comparative research project: 'Are placement students better psychologically prepared for life and work?'. The project is being initially funded through our University's Teaching and Learning Innovation Grant (see above).

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.

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 used to support staff interested in 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.

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