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Essential Enterprise Skills for Early Career Researchers. LERU Doctoral Summer School at University College London: A Case Study

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University College London

LERU Doctoral Summer School

'Essential Enterprise Skills for Early Career Researchers'

Case Study

Background

University College London delivers a large range of transferable skills development activities and programmes which are compulsory for PhD students. These range from presentation skills, networking, business orientated finance and entrepreneurial activities. UCL is a member of the League of European Research Universities which recently sponsored an annual doctoral summer school involving doctoral candidates from affiliated universities across Europe. The aims of the programme are to provide PhD researchers with an opportunity for their personal and professional development through an interdisciplinary, intercultural and a truly international programme to stimulate the learning experience and future career opportunities for the participants.

UCL Graduate School also introduces demand led programmes by considering shorter practitioner led activities and workshops in the area of Intellectual Property, Entrepreneur (Guest Speaker) events, workshops on writing a business plan, networking, commentary feedback which are based on the needs of their current PhD cohort. Many workshops are designed to offer postgraduate researchers an understanding of the concept and language in the business environment and also provide a framework to start-up a business.

In 2011, University College London hosted a six day Doctoral Summer School on the theme of Entrepreneurship. The programme focussed on developing knowledge and attributes for commercialising research and business ideas in an academic and

business environment. This involved the inclusion of interdisciplinary teams to focus on business ideas on global challenges such as food security, urbanisation, population growth, climate change and energy. These groups were conducted under supervision of resource management and intellectual property experts. The programme concludes with the presentation of a business idea from each group to a panel of professionals; students are provided with a certificate of attendance.

Programme Design

The UCL Graduate School conducted a needs analysis to gain an understanding from an offerings point of view and to map the estimated demand and interest in certain areas in order to allow the team to co-ordinate activities. The programme team conducted qualitative and quantitative post evaluation feedback through the use of online questionnaires and surveys on all development activities, programmes and workshops with a focus on the suitability, usefulness, support and expectations of the activity.

UCL's introduction of postgraduate enterprise and entrepreneurship transferable skills training derives from a demand from students, funding councils and organisational key objectives. The UCL Graduate School was commissioned to deliver a series of activities but found that they would be able to develop resources to an additional capacity in their current provision of activities.

The programme content on the LERU doctoral summer school is generic as transferable skills are not specific to disciplines but the team did feel a need to use a range of examples based on the profile of students in order to enhance student engagement.

Terminology

The terminology used in the programme, and for marketing purposes, has been generic but provision was made for adapting the examples based on the profile of students. Timothy Barnes stated *"If you are talking to scientists you would use different examples but the learning points aren't any different but the audience simply responds better with an example that actually applies to them"*.

Staff Resources

UCL uses a combination of internal and external experts to deliver activities and programmes. Expert speakers from different faculties and departments of the University are joined by external speakers such as trainers and guests to focus on a number of themes ranging from leadership to presentation. The programme team

requires professionals in all parts of the programme to have a track record in programme delivery and practical experience in entrepreneurship.

Students

UCL has three schools and every faculty has been represented in the programme with a similar take up of students in line with the overall number of faculties. Most students at UCL are interested in taking part in programmes particularly in the area of enterprise and entrepreneurship as many participants have benefited from undertaking the programme in various ways. The students' initial motivations towards participating in such programmes derives from their interest within the area and in their professional development. The impact tends to be focussed around the feasibility and reality of the commercialisation aspects. However, some students may establish service businesses as a result of their training whereas others may take their research and ideas to larger companies who are better able to meet high capital costs.

According to Mr Barnes, following completion of their research, they may either work in academia, use their research and generic skills and apply this to another project, or start a business. *"A research student may do a number of things, he may use his PhD to become an academic researcher in which he/she will have to work with businesses due to funding councils requiring translation of activities into specific outcomes or, they may work in a business for which enterprise and entrepreneurship skills would enhance the quality of their work, or alternatively they may choose to commercialise their research which will help them to understand different routes. PhD researchers need to have a reasonable amount of understanding at least at a conceptual level and at the level of motivation and understanding of the commercial environment."*

Creating Awareness

The project team used email as a primary mechanism to communicate with groups, staff and postgraduate researchers at various stages. The programme was also promoted to raise the awareness of its target audience through posters, leaflets, website advertisements, and staff awareness. The team used the website and staff awareness sites depending on the entry points staff and students use to find information. The programme has been promoted externally at trade events and discussions at conferences as well as gaining extensive press coverage in an article featured in the *Sunday Times*.

Organisational

"UCL is arguably the first university which has all of its business related activities including supporting student ventures, staff training, outreaching support for local business and technology transfer in one division of the University. We have published a strategy of targets which includes the intention to directly support the formation of 500 new companies in the next five years. This is what we [UCL] are trying to do and this is a core strategic objective of the institution."

The programme is closely aligned with the general direction and desirability of the impact as expressed in the Research Excellence Framework and institutional objectives. From a strategic and institutional viewpoint, UCL and the Graduate School believe that such provision needs to be in place to provide their graduates with alternative routes. Of course, having successful graduates also benefits the institution. To promote this further, UCL has also collaborated with London Business School by purchasing a number of places on a MBA programme in areas such as Technology Management. This provides a different environment and exposure for the researcher. UCL has also introduced a Knowledge Exchange Associate programme which entails PhD research but into practice with an SME. The Knowledge Exchange Association combines training at basic and intermediate level skills with a project. UCL provides the PhD student with paid employment to liaise with an SME and to download the commercially useful contents to that business as the research.

Outcomes

UCL has the highest number of graduates starting a business in the UK with a large profile of businesses creating employment. There is a growing segment of students taking entrepreneurship as an alternative to seeking employment in academia. However, this depends on whether they have a business idea. This has been evident in the case of two students who met at an affiliation between University College London and London Business School. This resulted in the start-up of a company which has recently attracted the interest of global companies.

The outcomes from the LERU Doctoral Summer School programme are difficult to assess owing to a number of reasons. As people experience a range of activities it becomes difficult to assess or study the direct links between an outcome and an activity. Most PhD students don't take their content and research into a commercial environment straight away and some may work in academia for while before starting up a business. In addition, the programme was only hosted for the first time in 2010, with another event in 2011.

The programme team has gained anecdotal feedback such as "I got a job because of what you taught us" and "that was the difference between me and another

candidate" and "I have started my business and I employ fifteen people, you inspired me to do that". Not only has the team received positive feedback from students but also the EPSRC.

Learning Outcomes

- Programmes should be practitioner led.
- Deliver in a non lecture format.
- Provide appropriate information and support.
- Offer good solutions in a broad range of areas.