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Developing employability skills through interdisciplinary industry challenges

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HEA Annual Conference 2017: Generation TEF: Teaching in the spotlight

4-6 July 2017



Title of session

Developing employability skills through interdisciplinary industry challenges

Abstract

This session will explore best-practice models for embedding interdisciplinary collaboration into the UG student experience. Key challenges, levers/mechanisms and institutional barriers will be discussed and debated. The Innovation and Creative Exchange Project will be presented as a blueprint for innovation in pedagogy. This project provided an exchange for industry and businesses to present challenges, and an opportunity for student to develop professional networks beyond their discipline. By drawing on specific examples of interdisciplinary student collaborative industry challenges implemented in the last 2 years at the University of Huddersfield, the value to student learning, employability and professional development is ascertained.

Outline

The first half of the session explores interdisciplinary as a mechanism for embedding employability skills within the undergraduate HE experience, through interactive group discussion. The innovation and creative exchange will be presented as a best-practice framework in the form of a case study, drawing on specific examples of interdisciplinary student collaborative industry challenges implemented in the last 2 years at the University of Huddersfield. There will be opportunity to debate and discuss and share good practice throughout the case study.

Today's global society creates an environment characterised by 'wicked' and messy problems, the solutions to which require transcendence of traditional discipline-based boundaries, and new forms of knowledge-sharing and knowledge development. It is widely accepted that innovative, sustainable and exciting developments cross traditional disciplinary boundaries and, therefore, have great potential to break through complex social problems, foster innovation and lead to novel concepts and solutions. This 'wicked' context creates a strong rationale for embedding interdisciplinarity into the Higher Education (HE) student learning experience, which is increasingly supported by UK government policy-makers, funding councils and professional bodies. Providing an environment to ensure graduates can develop the necessary skill set to progress to highly skilled employment and further study, is a key measure in the TEF. 'Enterprise and Entrepreneurships Education' identified transdisciplinary/interdisciplinary working to have a strong connection with the development of employability, innovation, knowledge-transfer, commercialisation, and intellectual property (QAA, 2012). Thus, the argument to support embedding collaborative opportunities into the undergraduate

experience is robust and deemed essential to prepare graduates for the global complex challenges that they will be faced with upon employment. However, one major challenge faced within UK HE institutional settings is that each discipline has developed its own goals for academic and research endeavours, which has led to a parochial approach to teaching and research development. This is in conflict to the recognised best practice where sustainable, innovative and novel solutions are designed and implemented by team, not individuals. It is therefore crucial to develop organisational and management structures to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration within the student higher education experience. This is a fundamental change in student learning, which will lead to new relationships between theory and practice, through the creation of sustainable creative learning networks involving students and staff from all disciplines.

The Innovation and Creative Exchange Project has developed a legacy of learning that promotes innovation, design thinking, new product development and further opportunities to take products through to market through developing sustainable networks with the commercial sector. It provides a real opportunity to develop employability skills through partnerships with student peers and the commercial sector, in a fast paced flexible and challenging learning environment. It brings together students from across the University, who value innovative thinking, ideas generation and interdisciplinary working as part of their student experience. It has created a blue-print for innovation (case study) in pedagogy through a functioning exchange for industry and businesses to present challenges and opportunity for student to develop core skills in relation to employability and sustainable professional networks.

Keywords

Interdisciplinarity, employability, partners in learning, co-creation of knowledge, flexible learning, networking, industry challenges.

Key messages

- The importance of providing an environment to ensure graduates have developed the necessary skill set to progress to highly skilled employment and further study (TEF).
- The value of embedding interdisciplinary into the Higher Education student learning experience, as a mechanism for increasing employability skills and developing a lifelong network.
- A sustainable model to partnering with the commercial section to enhance learning and co-creation of knowledge will be shared with the participants.
- Practical solutions for the implementation of interdisciplinarity within the HE student experience to enhance learning will be shared.