

How inspirational and innovative Teaching and Learning projects at the University of Huddersfield prepare our graduates with employability skills for a changing world of work.

Abstract

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.

Our Teaching and Learning initiatives include a suite of projects funded by the ‘Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund’. The paper will focus on how these innovative and inspirational projects support the development and ultimately the employability of our students. In particular projects focus on:

Practical support for students including: peer assisted learning, support for disabled students, researching how today’s students learn, and building student confidence in the use of an academic library.

Employer engagement and working with the wider community. This includes community and work related opportunities for music students, networks for students and professionals in creative and traditional industries, and work with our partners in the Further Education sector.

Creativity: including pure creativity delivered by an inspirational drama team, and using creativity within teaching in Higher Education.

These projects help 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’.

The paper will focus upon how the project outcomes support our students in entering an ever changing world of work.

Introduction

This discussion paper explores how our inspirational and innovative Teaching and Learning (T&L) projects support the development of our students in becoming more enterprising and employable, via initiatives covering, practical support for students, external engagement and creativity. Employability skills and work placement are interlinked at Huddersfield with most courses having a work based learning element. A recent Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) project entitled, ‘Student Employability and Good Practice in Placement Provision’

showed that many of our students who did placements got better jobs, salaries and degree classifications. The projects are often about opening doors for opportunity, allowing students to develop a portfolio of skills. For further details on our projects visit www.hud.ac.uk/tqef

Literature Review

TQEF Projects support our university's strap line, 'inspiring tomorrow's professionals' and our strategic map 'to produce enterprising and employable graduates'. Objectives from the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) to develop higher level skills in the UK are likewise supported via the projects. George Cox emphasises the need for creativity in his Review of Creativity in Business (2005) here he states that '*UK companies and industries will need to produce innovative, high-quality, high value-added products and services, and bring them quickly and effectively to market.*' Cox summarises by stating, '*greater creativity is a key to greater productivity.*' In addition support throughout key transitions such as early work experience is important. Researchers from CERI at Michigan State University conclude that '*supervisors play a key role in shaping job satisfaction and meeting obligations.*' This supervisory role has similar key elements of mentorship to those being emulated in our projects.

Discussion

As a University, Huddersfield is committed to the UK Government's widening participation agenda and recognises that this remit brings with it challenges both in the classroom and affiliated support services.

On a practical level a number of our TQEF projects have explored methods of easing the transition to university for our undergraduates. Research on mentorship from CERI at Michigan State University suggests that young people seek out mentors throughout their lives, particularly at key transition stages like a first job or work placement. A successful project in peer mentoring helped first year students settle into university life and provided friendship and support across year groups. This project has developed into Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), where in collaboration with a subject academic, student peer leaders direct study sessions for students in the year below. A similar project has seen the introduction of student library and IT mentors. Our follow up evaluations indicated that students felt more comfortable asking their peers for help and advice in the somewhat daunting and alien environment of a large academic library. Again this mentor scheme provides students with practical advice and guidance which ultimately builds their confidence and skills levels. Both these projects have dual benefits; the recipients are afforded a mentorship opportunity, and those acting as mentors gain confidence and develop valuable higher level skills, such as communication, leadership and teamwork. These skills should hold them in good stead when looking for future

employment whether placement based or post-graduation. For those students coming from other forms of recent study, the changes in university teaching and learning and feedback and assessment methods can be unfamiliar and off putting. To fully benefit from a university education and its subsequent advantages, students need to be fully engaged in their learning. Our research into the views of the 'Xbox generation' found that this generation of students are accustomed to using technologies for a variety of tasks, and find it difficult to connect with the traditional teaching method of lecturing. Furthermore with a diverse student population in terms of age, ethnicity and background there is a need to consider different learning styles and strategies to best enable our students to achieve their potential. Feedback and assessment is another issue as students coming out of school are used to receiving regular formalised systematic feedback and some students find it hard to adapt to a situation where they are expected to take a greater ownership of their learning. Other societal changes also need to be reflected in course provision. For example it was found that students joining university music courses are changing. Once the domain of classical musicians attached to orchestras, today's student may also be in a rock band at weekends or at home with the technology of the production studio.

As well as supporting transitions, other TQEF projects look at interactions and partnerships with external organisations including employer engagement, networks and volunteering. Music students are being encouraged to develop their employability skills in an innovative way. For example students lead instrument playing classes in primary schools or project manage events such as a community Carnival or Mela. Acquiring these 'business' skills which form the foundations for event management or highly competitive freelance artist work would be impractical in a classroom environment. Two other projects specifically focus on community engagement and working with industry professionals.

Computing and Engineering has a long tradition of working with employers, primarily through sandwich placement schemes (Co-op). A more strategic approach has been initiated that includes embedding employer panels into the curriculum and developing and strengthening partnerships between academia and industry via Knowledge Transfer Programmes. In art and design a network has been set up to promote interaction between students, staff and employers. A series of 'industry lectures' covering a variety of disciplines and businesses (freelancers to large agencies) enables both students and staff to gain insight into their profession and keep up with current developments. An additional benefit is that cross disciplinary working is improving within the school, a practice which is common in the profession and a valuable experience for students. The network also runs

workshops and is used as a platform for industry competitions which can lead to placement opportunities for successful students.

A volunteering project continues to build on previous work and offers both students and staff the opportunity to widen their horizons and gain experience and skills; opportunities include Asian Women's Night and Books for Tanzania. A variety of organisations and projects benefit many of which are third sector and in turn this raises the profile of the university within our local community. These opportunities can be particularly valuable for students in competitive subjects like the arts, where volunteering can provide a route into employment.

Finally, our projects aim to develop creative thinking and problem solving in both staff and students. Our drama team run workshops on pure creativity, teaching a range of strategies which can be employed to come up with alternative ideas or solutions to problems. 'Creativity cafes' for staff encourage the consideration of different methods for engaging students in the teaching and learning process. Best practice is being disseminated on a DVD showcasing 20 examples of creative teaching and engagement across the campus. By developing our staff to both think creatively and employ creative teaching techniques we hope to inspire our students to be innovative and creative in their own approaches.

Paper Conclusions and / or Implications

One of the main aims of today's students in attending University is to improve their career and employment prospects. As our students cover a range of ages, ethnicities and previous experiences, to help them fulfil their potential consideration needs to be given to providing both appropriate teaching methods and support mechanisms. By putting in place a range of interventions we hope to initially ease the transition into university life and then provide a number of routes for students to gain employability and enterprise skills. Practical support, in the form of peer mentors, is designed to help student settle into academic life and improve retention and progression within the critical early period. The PAL project has been so enthusiastically received by students and staff alike that other subject areas are already implementing it. Providing a means for our students' to gain awareness and understanding of their chosen profession whether via volunteering, employer panels or industry lectures is critical if they are to appreciate the skills they will need to gain. By enabling our students' to build employability skills, such as communication, team working and leadership and to gain confidence in their abilities we aim to produce critical and creative thinkers who will continue to learn and develop in their lives post graduation.

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