Practice Papers

"Get out to work"!: An evaluation of an employability project

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper used a case study approach to evaluate an employability based curriculum project. The aim of the present study was to explore issues related to the project, the problems that arose in employer engagement and discuss how these challenges might be met. The project aimed to develop and support work placement within the diverse portfolio of dance, drama, leisure, music and sport. Highlighting the issues associated with relating curriculum projects to temporary funding, the stability of placement support became threatened when the funding ceased. The paper concludes by noting the willingness of the hospitality sector to offer placements and the limitations of small to medium sized employers to support such opportunities.

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1. Introduction

In 1997 United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education was challenged to improve employability opportunities making courses more vocationally relevant whilst vocationally relevant skills and knowledge are referred to within many Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject benchmark statements used to design curriculum (Busby, 2003; Dearing, 1997). Many students are combining study with part time employment (Barron, 2007; Martin & McCabe, 2007) but this does not necessarily mean that these opportunities are in degree related positions. Employability opportunities embedded within both undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes are supposed to facilitate the opportunity for students to apply theoretical concepts. Current research in workplace settings grants students with sense making of complex situations and 'enhancing their skills development through practical experiences' (Nixon, Smith, Stafford, & Camm, 2006, p. 6). One model that demonstrates how universities have approached this issue is the Understanding, Skills, Efficiency Beliefs, Metacognition (USEM) model which interrelates these key concepts (Yorke & Knight, 2006). Although there are other models (Yorke, 2006) common features across these identify the need for knowledge, skills, qualities and experience.

Against this background the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure (SSPAL) at the University of Wolverhampton managed and delivered two discreet projects to support the development of work placements. These projects were delivered across the five departments of Sport, Music, Dance, Drama and Leisure.

1.1. Background

An analysis against the drivers of the UK Dearing Report in 2003 showed that work experience and placements were patchy across the five departments within SSPAL. Leisure Industries (Tourism, Hospitality, Event and Venue, Sport

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Management) had an established history of offering six and twelve month placements but little 'in-module' engagement. Dance, drama, music and sport had limited experience at longer placements although some departments offered 'in-module', mostly educationally based, school opportunities which were popular with students moving onto Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programmes upon graduation. In addition the departments of dance, drama and music focused on the development of entrepreneurial skills as many of the students would join small companies or create independent self-employed roles. The range of work based learning opportunities provided therefore, included traditional placements for a period of time, observations, peer group experiences, coaching and teaching opportunities.

In 2004 and 2006 two School wide projects entitled "*Get Out to Work!*" (GOTW) aimed to develop support systems for students on placements. Funded from European Social Funds (ESF) monies, the projects recognised a developing administrative burden in relation to placements and aimed to support both academics and students. This was primarily provided through a dedicated placement office and officer. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the two projects: 'Get out to work 1' (GOTW1) and 'Get out to work 2' (GOTW2), in order explore issues related to the projects, the problems that arose in employer engagement and discuss how these challenges might be met.

2. Methodology

A case study provides the researcher with a specific instance that can demonstrate a general principle and can be valuable in situations where the researcher is integrally involved in the case (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). The case study provides a suitable tool for this research as the method provides a 'study of an instance in action' (Adelman, Kemmis, & Jenkins, 1980). However, whilst this case study draws from the evidence base provided by minutes of meetings in the project, documentation and experiences of the researchers (field observation), it does pick out the more striking features of the case which could be seen as a distortion of the full account (Cohen, Manion, & Morrision, 2010). Case studies are a commonly used research tool within social sciences and education where the disciplines accept that multiple sources of evidence provide a constructed validity that may provide frameworks for improvement in practice or recommendations (Breiter, Tyink, & Corey-Tuckwell, 1995; Burns, 2007; Gray, 2009).

In this paper we will explore the headline account of the findings from these projects and not attempt to converge evidence from multiple cases. If this provides some guidance for others considering engagement with employers, provision of work placement or undertaking ESF funding is a positive outcome of the paper.

3. Benefits of GOTW

The projects provided an additional level of student support within the school, although it should be noted that this kind of support was fully embedded within other areas of the university in schools which are dependent upon placements for professional training. It therefore represented an innovative approach to the use of ESF start up funding.

GOTW provided a forum for departments to share best practice on work placement and the opportunities which existed in individual modules and through the work of individual staff/employer relationships. It also opened up the discussion on employer engagement with academics and a range of employers to attend the formal ESF meetings (a requirement of the funding). Whilst this was a positive outcome the lapse between GOTW1 and GOTW2 led to a lack of continuous engagement amongst employers and academics.

4. Barriers to success

Enhancement of the school's provision through the projects was noted in the qualitative responses in student feedback questionnaires, module leaders commentary and at the University Placement Forum Committee. All sources recognised that the support had relieved the administrative burden from academic staff and provided additional support for students. Although the projects greatly enhanced elements of the school's provision, however, there were considerable barriers from the supporting resources, the language of the discourse, ESF rules and ensuring consistent employer engagement.

As described earlier work placement can enhance a curriculum offering but when it is based upon peripheral funding this can jeopardise the stability of the curriculum. A vital resources issue emerged from the peripheral nature of the funding; the project officers who were employed on temporary contracts for the life span of the project. This resulted in having to retrain a new officer for GOTW2 as well as feelings of uncertainty and long term stability for the individuals. For the staff of the school there was a feeling of loss of the role between and post projects which is still being evidenced by frequent requests for a replacement of the role. Although a local issue it relates to the difficulties of having core curriculum dependent upon peripheral funding, thus making it vulnerable to funding cuts.

GOTW had varying uptake in the number of students undertaking placements across the different departments within the school. For example in project 1 six students in the Leisure department undertook long term placements (6 and 12 months), 17 Sports students undertook week long placements and 23 students across the school used the office. The Leisure departments had sandwich placements clearly embedded within the curriculum, continued to benefit from the projects particularly in preparing students to undertake placement and supporting them 'in situ'. Other departments experienced more difficulties for a variety of reasons despite Drama, Music and Sport having school based module placements. A reluctance amongst some department staff to acknowledge the legitimacy of those experiences as "placements" and their