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Development of Transnational Work-Based Learning in the Curriculum - An Approach Informed by the Student Experience

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Introduction

This contribution to Dialogue gives the basis, outcomes and recommendations of a pilot project that was funded by HEA/UKCISA under its "Connections" internationalisation pilot projects programme, and was delivered in 2012.

The project was undertaken collaboratively by the Technology School of Southampton Solent University, the b.i.b. International College in Germany (the Bildungszentrum fuer Informationverarbeiteende Berufe International College, translated as the "Educational Centre for Information Processing Professions), the European Information Service Centre (EISC) Ltd and the SSU Solent Students Union (represented by a School computing student).

The project built on a 2010-11 Solent Strategic Development project (SDP) project in that it took a practice-oriented and transnational approach to enhance graduate employability. The output from this SDP project was presented internally and externally throughout 2011, and consequently led to a successful HEA bid. The project leader will be contributing to an open HEA/UKCISA "Internationalisation

in H.E. - Making Connections" on 12th March 2013 in London. A proposal for a third collaborative pan-University project that continues to build on and develop this theme is currently being written.

The report draws upon the [Open Educational Resource (OER) ebook-](#) which is an output from the project. This contains considerably more detail including all the underpinning employer & student survey data and interview transcripts of 7 transnational work placement students (6 b.i.b. students in the Hampshire region and 1 Solent student in Munich) and their respective employers.

Aims of the project

There is convincing evidence that transnational work-based learning (WBL) enhances employability (Archer, 2008, p.5) however, according to Erasmus statistics available on the British Council website, only about 500 UK students pursued work placements in "Science, Mathematics and Computing" in 2009-10 (2010-11 data not available at the time). Engagement with international WBL in the curriculum is also relatively low, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines in the UK. The aim of the project is therefore to develop transnational work placements and internationalised learning activities to develop graduate employability skills.

Project delivery

This project looked at what the reasons might be for the low student engagement in international work placements based on current student perspectives, and how participation can be increased using contemporary approaches such as social media. The plan was essentially to incorporate a methodology based on triangulating current student and employer perspectives of working internationally, with the literature. It was hoped that this would lead to enhancements to the WBL curriculum with respect to developing skills.

Graduate Attributes Indicators (GAI) was the chosen review method (Oliver 2012) as it provided a well-researched and established framework. In addition to expected attributes such as written and oral communication, teamwork and IT skills; the framework also includes attributes for intercultural understanding. Universities and other organisations have proposed alternative definitions of attributes that graduates should achieve (Yorke et al. 2005 and 6), which are based on significant primary data from Australian HE institutions and beyond.

Management of the project

The project team's plan, resources and methodology were all established in-line with the project proposal and agreed with senior management of the partner institutions. The project was monitored and controlled by the project leader throughout. The project process and product were evaluated by applying an adaption of Kirkpatrick's 4 levels of reaction, learning, behaviour and organisation (Kirkpatrick 2012).

Data collection

Data was collected by interviewing and surveying current and potential 2nd year (level 5) Technology placement students and their employers. All the 2nd year SSU students who attended class during the survey week were also asked to complete a paper questionnaire about their preconceptions on transnational WBL in the curriculum. Although this required manual processing, it was decided that this approach would maximise the return. At the start of the project it was the intention to measure the effect of using social media and also to survey the students again at the end of the trial; this however proved to be impractical as the students had already started their examinations at this period.

An online survey was also used to collect data from a European-wide network of enterprises using the EISC data base which had access to this network. Although response rates are normally low with this approach, it was nevertheless felt to be an efficient and cost-effective solution to gain this additional data.

Analysis of the student and employer perspectives

An analysis of the students and employers responses to the survey can be found in the appendix to the OER ebook. This revealed the following:

GAI (Graduate Attributes Indicators)
- Written and Oral Communication Skills
  Interpersonal and communication skills were rated highly in the survey of employers.
- Teamwork   Skills
  Ability to work as part of a team... is rated as top in the survey of employers.

▢ Intercultural Understanding

The students confirmed in the start and end interviews, the importance of intercultural understanding including "a sensitivity to other cultures".

▢ Using ICT

It is evident in the student interviews that IT skills were helpful, notably "IT skills are a great international means of communication". The global predominance and consistency of office and software development tools and IT tools generally clearly helps as indicated by the employer view that "The international language of IT is English".

OTHER –

▢ Language Skills

Language skills are clearly important "Much of the language of IT is also in English" and "but those without much German could get by if they were keen to learn and fit in"
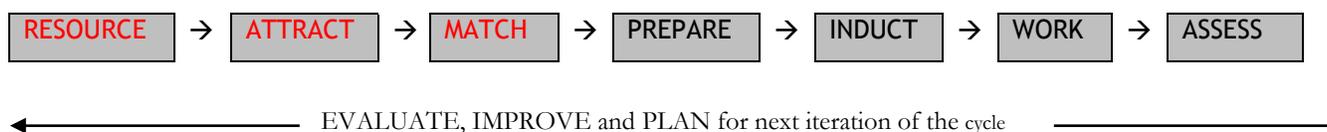
▢ Attitudes

Unsurprisingly, "Being motivated and enthusiastic" was rated highly by employers. The students indicated being "Open to new things, adaptable, confident" and "Being prepared to take risks and move out of one's comfort zone" as important.

▢ Discipline-Specific Skills

It is evident that computing/IT skills were highly valued and additionally helped because of the international nature of IT.

Stages when developing transnational placements

The model below, abstracted from the OER, shows stages in the life-cycle of developing transnational placements. The red indicates stages additional for transnational over national placements.

| RESOURCE | → | ATTRACT | → | MATCH | → | PREPARE | → | INDUCT | → | WORK | → | ASSESS |

← ——————— EVALUATE, IMPROVE and PLAN for next iteration of the cycle ———————

Figure 1 -Life cycle model

It is also clear that the stakeholders learnt how to benefit from and improve this process, particularly with respect to the PREPARE stage. There is also encouraging evidence that stakeholders continued to "spread the word" and develop the transnational work placement programme more deeply and widely.

It remains, however, an open question as to the extent of the project's impact on the partner institutions at organisation level. More specifically, whether it results in the development of a fully supported transnational work placement programme across the institutions, with the potential to attract new students. So far, two 2nd year Solent IT students "attracted, matched and prepared" through April to June 2012 are now working their placement year at Roland Berger Strategy Consultants in Munich and Hamburg respectively – a 100% increase on last year!

Using the example internationalised learning activities in the OER, it should be straightforward to establish in the next academic year, a 2nd year (level 5) 20 credit point Graduate Development module that is taught across the School. Although the reaction of stakeholders at the main dissemination event was very positive, the intention is to evaluate the impact fully next year.

Key outcomes

Essentially the reaction of all the stakeholders, including students, employers and placement tutors as evidenced by the interviews and surveys in the OER, was entirely positive. There are, however, some key outcomes which also reflect the proposed intended outcomes. These include the following suggestions:

- a proposed life-cycle model for supporting transnational work placement in the curriculum
- a first attempt to attract students to work placement using social media
- a brief analysis of perspectives of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to work globally with reference to a published "graduate attributes" framework
- example internationalised learning activities for developing graduate employability skills.

Challenges that have been overcome

The strength of the project lay in having a multi-faceted project team which included the many employers (including international companies), students, services and other stakeholders. This is turn created its own coordination and communication challenge though the incremental development of the OER ebook as a common repository of plans and information helped. Ultimately it was the many individual "messages" to make sure things happened, which proved the most effective way forward. Furthermore, informing and briefing more widely, including attracting 35 attendees to the main dissemination event, was also a time-consuming challenge overcome in a similar manner.

Connecting stakeholders

This project and its events, illustrate the value of a significant work placement programme in connecting institutions, employers, students, faculties and services. In particular, forging on-going mutually beneficial collaborations with employers, has been a significant additional benefit gained from these projects.

The photos below show the networking that took place at the main dissemination event on the 28th June 2012, and an event on the 19th April 2012, at which employers and students were interviewed and where other key employability colleagues networked. The main event included informal contributions from employers, students, tutors and support staff participating in the work placement programme, as well as presentations by the project team. Attendees came from across and beyond the University and also included members of the University's senior management team.

Networking-28 June 12   Students Interview-19 April 12   Employers & Tutors-19 April 12

Reflections and future sustainability

Continuing to develop the transnational work placement programme remains a key challenge for the team, together with tasks such as maintaining Erasmus/Leonardo Mobility funding, upgrading the University's new online placement application system for transnational placements, attracting students and identifying more transnational employers. This is discussed further in the OER ebook.

Developing internationalised learning activities related to graduate employability skills for all students at home, is sustainable in a normal module development cycle because no significant additional resources should normally be necessary.

Reflection on learning

At the start of the project it was not apparent just how critical the contribution of certain key team members would be in helping to achieve the project's success. Will we need to do things differently in future? Not significantly, although the project was probably too ambitious within the time available. However, with the sheer hard work by the project team (additional to normal commitments) we got away with it! Engaging students and the Students Union with the project, whether on the project team or contributing to the surveys and interviews, was thankfully straightforward. This perhaps reflects the growing recognition that international issues are important and that contributing to projects whilst at University is a bonus for the CV. Finding time early on to inform students about the project was another key lesson learnt.

Engaging service colleagues from across the institution such as staff from the University's employability, placements and international teams, and getting them to connect with the project, was also not a challenge as there was enthusiasm about providing support for a curriculum enhancement project that was sourced by academics. Again it paid dividends to find time early on to inform potential contributors about the project. In the same way it was found that engaging employers was also not a problem as links with the Enterprise Europe network had been established early on and potential mutual benefits identified.

Potential further work

As discussed earlier, it is the intention to continue to improve all the stages of the lifecycle model (Figure 1). For example, the two students who have now started their placements at Roland Berger Strategy Consultants in Germany, and the student who will be continuing to work at Roland Berger (and study the final year at a distance), have agreed to run the social media trial again to attract students using the established blog infrastructure but this time it will start at the beginning of next year.

There is considerable potential to research and draw upon developments in this employability field including the European University Enterprise Network (EUE - NET), which looks to coordinate and promote better collaboration between universities and enterprises at a European level and to disseminate cooperation models best practices.

Recommendations

Recommendations to institutions include:

Developing Transnational WBL in the Curriculum

1. Include, particularly in courses with little international curriculum content, relatively "quick-win" international learning activities such as working in international project teams, or simply creating a Europass CV, which should enhance graduate employability.

2. Support a transnational placement programme for at least 2 years to fully test the potential to attract students and the viability of the proposed life-cycle model in the particular institutional context.

3. Establish or extend work placement programmes and WBL, whether national or transnational, across the institution to enhance the employability of students, and to derive mutual benefit for tutors and employers.

Implementing Curriculum Development Projects

4. Find time early on to inform and identify from an often willing pool of students, employers, tutors, service colleagues and other stakeholders (both internal and external) that can bring real value to "connected" development projects of this nature.

5. Adopt an efficient and effective approach to communications (a necessary consequence of 4.).

The OER draws conclusions under the section *Transnational Work Placements, Internationalising the Curriculum* and *Connecting Potential Stakeholders*. This might also help colleagues draw up further recommendation relating to internationalising the WBL curriculum in their particular institutional context. All the interview transcripts (which have been checked and approved for publication by the participants) and survey data draw their own conclusions underpinning further recommendations.

Conclusion

All of the transnational work placement students (one in Munich and six in Hampshire) and their employers confirmed that the placement was entirely beneficial both to the student and to the employer. One of the students in particular, developed an online application for students to use in self-managing the processing of work placement documentation and other requirements. Furthermore, the

students' perspective that the experience enhanced their employability is entirely consistent with the literature.

Further information

- OER e-book on '*Development of Transnational Work-Based Learning in the Curriculum - An Approach Informed by the Student Experience'* published in June 2012 http://issuu.com/stlc/docs/dev_of_transnational_work_based_learning_in_curric
- Employer view on placement video published on 10 August 2012 (7 mins 31 sec) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9yS6Yw3ONQ
- b.i.b. International College www.bib.de
- HEA and UKCISA Connections: Pilot projects supporting internationalisation, February to September 2012
- http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/internationalisation/connections/Connections_Pilot_Projects
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