

HEA Annual Conference – Day 3: 11.15 Room 1.219

Title: Gaining academic value from extra-curricular work experience

Presenters: Gill Tunney, unit leader for Curriculum plus: Community Volunteering and Jacqueline Tuson, unit leader for Curriculum plus: Work-based Learning. Both presenters are from Southampton Solent University.

The conference theme: “Designing higher education of the future”.

Abstract:

Southampton Solent University is trying to “integrate academic and work-based learning” (and thereby increase students’ employability) by giving academic credit for the extra- curricular work experience that students gain while studying full time. The work experience may be paid or unpaid. This extra-curricular work experience is not necessarily aligned with the students’ core degree but students regard it as either a financial necessity or as a necessity in terms of boosting their cv.

In line with a suggestion from the National Association for Student Employment, the University has turned “this necessity into a virtue” by offering three parallel 20 credit units: work-based learning, coaching in the community and community volunteering. These units are collectively called Curriculum plus. They require 50 hours of work experience, can be taken at any level and are available to all students irrespective of their core discipline.

Curriculum plus aims to develop work and transferable skills but the central focus for these units is learning itself, whether that learning takes place in the University or at work. The students are made aware of their own attitudes to learning and the learning strategies that they adopt. They are then encouraged to relate these principles of learning to their extra curricular work and to their subject specific degree by means of a learning contract, a learning log and a reflective statement.

The workshop will consider the lessons gained from three years of running these units, basing findings on student and staff feedback. It will highlight the administrative and pedagogic challenges of delivering and assessing units across such a range of levels and disciplines.

The overarching concern with these units has been to maintain standards that are academically robust. The units try to develop both the higher skills of analysis, reflection and evaluation and the soft skills of self awareness and communication such that vocational skills are raised to a level of “graduateness” and professionalism.

The workshop will provide a forum for participants to share their own practice and it will encourage discussion of issues concerning the delivery and assessment of work experience.