

Work Shadowing: A Strategy to Encourage Networking and Enhance Communication Skills

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Background

Informal discussions with Popular Music Performance students at Solent University frequently reveal an inadequacy in confidence and/or proficiency when it comes to networking and interacting with professionals beyond their immediate network of contacts. This is not a new issue, as evidenced in articles such as Caldwell & Cattermole (2015). However, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, such students displayed a heightened reluctance and/or hesitancy to proactively expand their professional networks beyond their immediate circles. The consequences stemming from this tendency include potential delays in career progression and limitations in accessing diverse employment opportunities. Furthermore, ramifications extend to other areas such as National Student Survey (NSS) results, Graduate Outcomes, and ultimately, the reputation of Solent University's music scheme. Evidently an intervention was necessary to address these issues.

The Intervention

Guided by the 'Framework for Developing Employability' (Bennett et al. 2015), it was determined that additional opportunities were needed to:

- Encourage the growth of students' skills and knowledge, particularly communication abilities
- Develop career awareness
- Promote interaction with music industry professionals

To facilitate this, a decision was made to incorporate a work shadowing initiative into a Level 6 module as it also provided the **best potential** for an **immediate and positive impact on graduate outcomes**. Learning outcomes were modified and framed by the requirement for students to undertake a self-organised work shadowing activity. One of the initial challenges encountered was the absence of formal protocols for work shadowing initiatives at Solent University. Working closely with Solent Futures, and with special thanks to Kelsey Bland, new protocols and associated documents were created including a risk assessment (risk profile template) and email templates to confirm public liability insurance. The module's two assessments were rewritten: Firstly, a case study based on the work shadowing experience, and secondly, a technical showreel which enabled students to demonstrate a range of acquired skills and competencies.

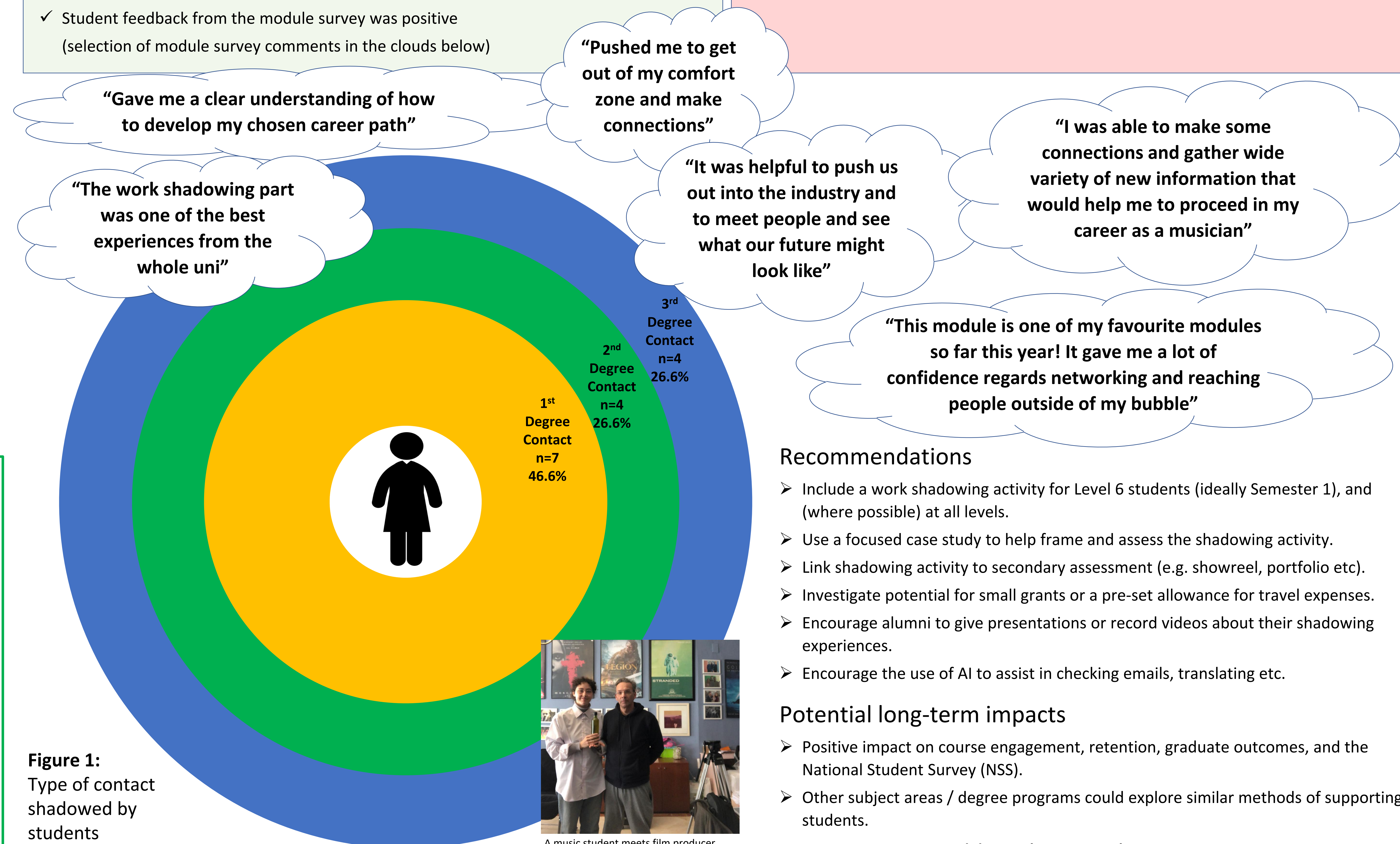
Module content

- Concept of shadowing and its benefits.
- Different types of shadowing opportunities.
- Aligning shadowing with personal / career aspirations.
- Effective communication and handling rejection.
- Email writing / social media communication targeting specific recipients.
- Safety, risk assessments and insurance protocols.
- Overcoming barriers to participation.
- Scope for Q&A / interview as part of shadowing.
- Creating a focused and well-structured case study.
- Reflecting on shadowing experience:
- Recognising and exploiting positive and negative aspects.
- Linking shadowing and case study to a technical showreel (Assessment 2).

Outcomes

- ✓ 53.3% shadowing activities with 2nd or 3rd Degree Contacts (see fig. 1).
- ✓ The intervention was effective; students were predominantly positive and engaged.
- ✓ Two potential employment opportunities arose directly from the shadowing activity.
- ✓ Rewriting and rephrasing emails activity was well received.
- ✓ Positive impact on students' confidence, particularly off-campus.
- ✓ 13 students successfully completed and passed both assessments on first submission.
- ✓ 2 students chose to repeat the shadowing process.
- ✓ 15 work shadowing experiences took place.
- ✓ Growth of network and employment opportunities.
- ✓ Increase in career path conversations and recognition of effective communication.
- ✓ Wide variety of shadowing activities. E.g. teaching, sound checks, performances, studio recording etc.
- ✓ Student feedback from the module survey was positive (selection of module survey comments in the clouds below)

- 46.6% shadowing activities with 1st Degree Contacts (see fig. 1).
- The long-term impact is difficult to assess.
- Shadowing activities sometimes required travel, especially for 3rd Degree Contacts. The cost of this was a hindrance.
- Reluctance to contact multiple people concurrently.
- Some shadowing activities became interviews.
- Some students did not obtain copies of Public Liability Insurance.
- Communication difficulties were encountered by some.
- Some students reverted to relying on 1st Degree Contacts after encountering rejection from 3rd Degree Contacts.
- Some students did not inform tutor before undertaking shadowing.
- Some students did not attend introductory session which delayed organising shadowing.



A music student meets film producer, Pepe Magán. Photo: Carmen Hernández

Recommendations

- Include a work shadowing activity for Level 6 students (ideally Semester 1), and (where possible) at all levels.
- Use a focused case study to help frame and assess the shadowing activity.
- Link shadowing activity to secondary assessment (e.g. showreel, portfolio etc).
- Investigate potential for small grants or a pre-set allowance for travel expenses.
- Encourage alumni to give presentations or record videos about their shadowing experiences.
- Encourage the use of AI to assist in checking emails, translating etc.

Potential long-term impacts

- Positive impact on course engagement, retention, graduate outcomes, and the National Student Survey (NSS).
- Other subject areas / degree programs could explore similar methods of supporting students.

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