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**Title of project: Employability and transferable skills: Investigating work placements for Humanities Students**

**Type of project** (e.g. Survey/ Case Study/ Action Research/ Development): Action Research Case Study

You may also include appropriate evidence in your appendices, e.g.

**Information/letter on ethics approval: already submitted**

**Information/progress on conditions** (If your initial TFAS application was ‘approved with conditions’, please provide evidence that these conditions have been met in at least one of the reports.): n/a

#### Aims of project

This project aims to enhance the employability of our graduates through an evaluative case study investigating subject-specific work placement and work experience opportunities in the local and regional community. The project will use a new work-facing module on ‘History and Heritage’ as a case study, although the aim of the project is to provide a sustainable model for a work-facing approach to teaching that can also be applied to other subjects.

In the past, History as a course has offered no work placements or work experience either as part of the curriculum or as extra-curricular activities. Preliminary research has shown that students often organised work experience themselves, but struggled to make the necessary contacts, or were limited to generic non-subject specific work opportunities. Starting with the 2012/13 academic year, a new work-facing second year ‘Heritage and Public History’ (HIST271) module will contain a practical fieldwork based project examining the presentations of ‘History and Heritage’ in co-operation with local stakeholders. This module is part of the national and UoP commitment to enhancing graduate employability. Key module aims and outcomes include the development of a range of practical transferable and subject-specific skills with a strong reflective component. Preliminary research has shown that similar work-facing subject-specific initiatives in the Humanities (such as the Art History project ‘Young Explainers’) make a significant difference to undergraduate students by enhancing employability as well as creating confidence in their skills.

The teaching fellowship therefore aims to

a) facilitate the new History module by establishing links with local and regional partners for the work-facing project

 component of the module

b) develop a sound model for a work-facing module, which will enable its eventual roll-out as a larger or compulsory module for all History second year undergraduates

c) provide a model for a work-facing subject-specific module for other subjects

**Background to project** (or context)

Employability has over the last decades become a key aspect of Higher Education as graduate skill development becomes increasingly important in a rapidly changing and ever more competitive global market, with changing roles and expectations for graduates.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Government’s White Paper on Higher Education (Students at the Heart of the System 2011) stresses in Chapter Three the importance of universities working with local employers to create employable and highly qualified graduates.[[2]](#footnote-2) Higher Education Institutions therefore are under increasing pressure to enhance graduate employability and focus on the student experience.[[3]](#footnote-3) Plymouth University’s ‘Teaching and Learning Strategy’ commits the University to developing graduates ‘who are readily employable [...] though direct work experience or volunteering’ by embedding ‘employability and career management skills into university programs and curricula, contributing to the development of graduate skills and attributes’ and ensuring that ‘each student has the opportunity to participate in accredited or supported work-based learning.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Yet, ‘approaches to enhancing and embedding employability vary widely across the HE sector and there is lack of consensus on how best to approach this aspect of students' development.’[[5]](#footnote-5) A great variety of research has explored different methods and approaches to enhancing and embedding employability, as well as the value of different skills that contribute towards employability.[[6]](#footnote-6) Our research focussed on subject-specific work experience to enhance our History graduate employability since many ‘recruiters are looking for 'work-ready' graduates with clear evidence of job specific skills in addition to high level graduate attributes.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet, preliminary research had shown that our undergraduate students’ work experience is often limited to generic non-subject specific work opportunities. While such work generates and enhances valuable transferable skills, many students would prefer work experience that is specific to their course or chosen career path. This would not only enhance their CV and gain them subject-specific skills, but experiencing different potential careers would also help them chose a career path since the majority of students did not know what they wanted to do after their degree, or even which options were open to them. While many were aware of the general graduate level employment opportunities, they had not identified careers in the History and Heritage sector that would be more subject related.

There is little doubt that especially subject and/or career-related work experience enhances graduate employability, particularly if this is linked to and incorporated into the curriculum. Mason, Williams and Cranmer have found that a ‘structured work experience has clear positive effects on the ability of graduates, firstly, to find employment within six months of graduation and, secondly, to secure employment in ‘graduate-level’ jobs.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Bridgstock stresses the importance of involving employers in university level skills development and work-facing courses.[[9]](#footnote-9) Furthermore, Cranmer recommends that universities increase ‘employment‐based training and experience, and/or employer involvement in courses, which *were* found to positively affect immediate graduate prospects.’[[10]](#footnote-10) While many degrees incorporate term-long work-based internships or practica in the curriculum, this approach is resource and time intensive, as these need to be assessed and supervised by the academic staff. We therefore decided to trial instead a work-facing module on ‘Heritage and Public History’ in 2012-13, which would combine theory and a student-led fieldwork project. The theoretical lectures would be supplemented by guest speakers from the Heritage industry, as well as field trips to local Heritage sites, since it has been shown that ‘…involving employers in the education experience, for example, through placements, case studies, delivery of guest lectures, can help students appreciate the relevance of their course and learn how to apply theory and knowledge in practical ways in the workplace.’[[11]](#footnote-11) In addition, students would organise in small groups to visit a local Heritage site for a short period of time (1-2 days) and observe staff activities and the day-to-day business. The aim of our research project was to enable the fieldwork component of this module by establishing links to the local Heritage sector, as well as to evaluate the module with regards to its planned extension to a larger student cohort, and implementation in other subjects. In addition, our project aimed to explore which extra-curricular activities could be offered to help the students gain further subject-specific work experience.

#### Methods used

Since this is a small-scale case study, with the aim to investigate, explore and evaluate a specific issue, with the aim to produce practical suggestions and recommendations, a qualitative action research approach was considered to be the most appropriate approach.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At the outset of the project, we conducted individual interviews with staff from other subjects, who implemented similar work experience projects to gain an understanding of their experience with these projects, the strategies they had adopted, any issues or difficulties that arose, and any recommendations they might have. We also interviewed History staff members to gain their views on employability and investigate if they had any links with Heritage sites that we could utilise for this project. We also conducted semi-structured small focus group interviews with History undergraduate students to gain an understanding of students’ level of work experience, the desirability of work experience (what value do students attach to work experience), and common barriers to obtaining work experience. We conducted four focus groups with a total of 17 second and third year undergraduate History students prior to starting the project. Apart from the general set topics we wanted to discuss, we did not follow a script as the interviews were exploratory, and we were keen to investigate the students’ attitudes to employability, especially issues arisen out of group interaction.[[13]](#footnote-13) The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded for analysis.[[14]](#footnote-14) The research allowed us to observe and reflect on a) the existing situation with regards to subject-specific work experience, b) the new work facing module and c) other help we can offer students to increase their employability through career-orientated work opportunities.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Much of the project time was spend on contacting local Heritage and Public History sites to discuss with them their potential involvement in the module, as well as what other work experience they could offer our students. Based on these negotiations, a list of sites was drawn up that students on the module could visit for their module fieldwork project. In order to evaluate the new Heritage module, we conducted two focus group interviews with 11 students taking the new Heritage module during week 4 of this module to explore their expectations of the new module, and their initial reactions. A final interview was conducted with 6 students on the Heritage module during the final week of this module to evaluate their overall experience with the module, and with the field work. By this stage, we added the proposed ‘work experience database’ (a result from the earlier interviews) as a topic to the interviews to explore students’ view and recommendations for this part of the project. Finally, in order to evaluate the module, we also interviewed the two members of staff who led this module, both at the start and on completion of the module. In addition, we contacted the heritage sites which students had visited for their field work project to gain their feedback. We also contacted all other sites again for the proposed ‘work opportunities database’.

**Results**

The initial student interviews clearly demonstrated that students often organised work experience themselves, but struggled to make the necessary contacts, or were limited to generic non-subject specific work opportunities. Of the students interviewed, only very few had managed to obtain any subject-specific or even subject-relevant work experience. It is interesting to note here that the students generally distinguished ‘work experience’ from ‘part time work’. Part time work or summer work, for example in bars or shops, was largely only understood in terms of ‘making money’. Very few students attached any skills value to this. Only a couple of students commented that their generic work experiences improved their transferable skills such as communication and team work. As such, many students exhibited very low skill awareness, which confirms the results of other research claiming that ‘many students and graduates have not reflected on the skills they have developed during their time in HE.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Therefore, many did not recognise their part-time job as relevant to their future career. ‘Work experience’, on the other hand, was understood to be unpaid volunteering or internships with a subject-specific or career-relevant employer. The students attached a high skill value to such ‘work experiences’ in terms of improving their career prospects.

Thus, although all students recognised the value of ‘work experience’ (in their definition as above), hardly any of them had managed to obtain any. We identified the key barriers to be financial concerns (work experience is almost always unpaid) coupled with time constraints (fitting it into the timetable and around paid part-time work, as well family commitments). Another key barrier was ‘not knowing where to find work experience.’ Most students struggled to locate subject-specific work experience. Some had signed up to other volunteering schemes offered for example by the Students Union, which however rarely yielded subject-specific opportunities. Others mentioned that lecturers told them of arising opportunities. The whole approach, however, was considered to be unstructured, decentralised and somewhat haphazard. Instead, they all supported the idea of having an electronic ‘notice-board’ that would list available work experience, sorted by subject. Due to the overwhelming student support for such a notice-board, we decided to start creating a work experience database, which will be discussed below.

Our next step, and the most time consuming one, was to make contact with a variety of local and regional heritage sites with the purpose of creating a pool of sites that students could visit for their fieldwork for the new module. We aimed to list a range of sites in different locations, to take into account that not all students live locally (travelling distance had been cited as a key barrier to work experience by students who live further afield). However, we quickly found that the choice would have to be limited since many sites are closed during term time (the project field work was planned for March). A few sites were too small, with not enough staff, to accommodate a visiting group of students. The final list of sites, which comprised around 12 sites of 60+ initially contacted, was made available to the students on the new module. Although the fieldwork was student-led within the stipulated parameters of the module and the assessment, staff working on similar projects had indicated that some students lack the confidence to contact the sites directly. Therefore we offered to be the main contact if required, although in the end this was not necessary.

The new Heritage module itself ran in the spring term of the 2012-13 academic year. We evaluated the new module by interviewing the students on the module at the start and at the end of term, as well as the module leaders. The initial interviews were conducted in week 4, and were mainly designed to explore the students’ expectations of the module. Of the 11 students interviewed, two had work experience in a museum (although not a History Museum) and one had worked for the National Trust. The rest had no subject-related work experience, although all agreed that this would be useful. Again, the majority had no career plan, some because it was ‘too much to plan too far ahead’ or because they didn’t know ‘what you can do with a History degree.’ One student commented, it would be useful to ‘try out a few different things, perhaps do a few days here and a few days there to see what captures.’ It was important to the students, however, that such work experience should be relevant, and not ‘mostly standing around’ or ‘honing your tea making skills,’ which they had accounting in previous volunteering placements.

In terms of the new module, students expected a work facing module, that would tell them more about ‘what people working in the Heritage sector actually do.’ They were also hoping to learn how to ‘translate your academic knowledge into practical skills.’ In general, students had expected a mostly practice orientated module, and had not expected to learn about the actual ‘business’ of heritage, or the theoretical underpinnings of presenting and marketing Heritage. As one student put it: ‘I thought it would be a practical thing, but it was much more academic.’ However, they came to appreciate that this is an important aspect of a career in the Heritage sector. As one student put it, ‘we had a curator do a guest talk, and I thought her daily job is like archiving, cataloguing, sorting out displays. But, when we asked her, she said “I spend most of my time helping people. They phone up, and I help them find material.” I did not expect that at all.’

We interviewed the students again at the end of the module to evaluate their experience with the module. They generally found the module interesting and useful. The guest lectures from Heritage specialist were particularly well received, as students learned what certain careers entail. One student found that it had opened ‘my eyes to a lot of different things…helps you get a concept of the industry as a whole and therefore you know how it relates to academia.’ Another argues that previously she had ‘a vague notion of becoming a History teacher when I started the course and now it has opened up other possibilities which I hadn’t perhaps considered.’ Overall the feedback was very positive for the new modules, aside from initial teething problems caused by unforeseen last minute changes in module staff and set-up. The module leaders report that at least three students have chosen a dissertation topic that arose from the Heritage module.

Our core objective in evaluating this module was the question if this could be rolled out to a larger student cohort, or even become a core module. This clearly demonstrates the value we attached to the work-facing module. Interestingly, the majority of the students on the module, as well as the module leaders, argued that the module should remain an optional choice. Only one student echoed our initial view that the module should be a core module rather than an option since it helped students to think about a career in the Public History and Heritage sector, which ‘aside from becoming a History teacher is one of the few career paths if they actually want to work as Historians.’ Most students questioned believed that the module should be option for those interested in the Heritage sector. The module leaders observed that those students who took the module as a first choice were far more engaged in the activities and project work, and received better grades, than those students who had been allocated to the module as their first choices were not available. This, combined with logistical concerns, led the module leaders to the conclusion, that this module should not become a larger or compulsory module as originally planned. Logistical concerns include especially the problem of finding local Heritage sites for 80 plus students each year. Although we have a list of sites throughout the South-West, and could find sites further afield, it is clear that the vast majority of students have to carry out the fieldwork during term time while they live in Plymouth or nearby. Larger group sizes would also have an impact on other aspects of the module including the organised site visits (where the entire group is taken to a local site for a tour) as well as the field work presentations.

**Recommendations and Reflections**

Instead, they proposed an alternative approach to increasing the work-facing aspect of the course. Rather than diluting the Heritage module in order to accommodate all students, the work-facing aspects should be distributed cross the curriculum and across all three years of the course, in order to increase students’ skills awareness and employability skills. This approach would enhance our existing provision of career orientated events, and also address the problem of career awareness (or lack thereof) identified by this project. For example, the module leaders suggested that the guest lecturers could also be included in a variety of core modules across all three years. In addition, existing field trips could be utilised to include work-facing site visits. In other words, the most successful aspects of the Heritage module could be expanded and embedded in the whole curriculum, while the Heritage module itself remains an optional choice for those particularly interested in the Heritage sector. Implementing this new model will mean creating a working relationship with many sites for all three years, generating and utilising cross-subject and cross-faculty collaboration, sharing of good practice and sharing of contacts with local partners in related subjects. Furthermore, work-facing teaching needs to be integrated into students’ Personal Development Planning to enable them to reflect on the skills gained in order to increase their skills and career awareness.

In addition, for those students pursuing further work opportunities, we have created a database, which has now gone live on the student History pages. The database lists local and regional Heritage sites, which work opportunities they might offer, and the relevant contact details. The site is staff managed so arising and ad hoc work opportunities can be listed promptly, and emailed to the students. In some cases, a member of our staff is the main contact for a site (particularly where the site is small and cannot manage a lot of student enquiries). The site provides a one-stop shop in a central location, so students know where to look for subject-specific work opportunities. The next phase of the project will be to increase provision, and include other subjects in the list to enable students to ‘try out’ different careers in different fields. We also aim, in the next phase of the research cycle, to contact schools. Getting work experience in schools was cited by those students interested in teaching as ‘very difficult. Schools hardly ever get back to you.’ We would therefore want to include school contacts in the database, as well as links to other volunteering sites and organisations. Students also mentioned the importance of feedback. For example, in evaluating the module, some fieldwork sites were highly recommended, while others were felt to be less useful. This will be taken into account when selecting the sites for next year. A similar feedback option would be useful for the database, to enable a frequent review of the work opportunities included. In the long-term, we would also like to internationalise the database by adding international contacts of employers offering work placements (for example the EU), since internationalisation is increasingly important in the global market.

Since we started to contact local Heritage sites, a range of other potential collaborative projects have emerged, all of which generate further work-facing opportunities for our students, including for example a collaborative exhibition project with a local site. Students who have worked at or visited a site, often made valuable contacts. Some have reported that this led to further work opportunities or even graduate employment. It is therefore vitally important for us to nurture and foster our relationship with these sites, which needs to be an ongoing process. From our interviews with other staff running similar projects, and from our own experience so far, this is time consuming, and needs to be factored into staff workload allocation.

**Keywords**

History, employability, subject-specific work opportunities, work experience, career skills, career awareness

1. See for example Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, School of Education, Nottingham University (2002) “Introducing and supporting key skills in Higher Education,” <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/shared/shared_cdell/pdf-reports/keyskillspack.pdf>, page 57, accessed 7 August 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Government White Paper, “Students at the Heart of the System 2011,” pge 39, <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32409/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf>, accessed 11 February 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example Ann Pegg et al, *Pedagogy for Employability*, HEA 2012, <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012.pdf>, accessed 12 February 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plymouth University, “Teaching and Learning Strategy 209-2012,” page 3, <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/files/extranet/docs/web/teachingandlearningstrategy2009to2012.pdf>, accessed 11 February 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Angela Maher and Sarah Graves, “Enhancing Graduate Employability,” <http://www.enhancingemployability.org.uk/good_practice.php>, accessed 8 August 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a range of such projects see for example http://www.graduate-employability.org.uk/publications.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The University of Edinburgh- Employability Initiative, “Why is employability important?” <http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/Why/>, accessed 26 July 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Geoff Mason, Gareth Williams and Sue Cranmer, “Employability Skills Initiatives in Higher Education: What effects do they have on Graduate Labour Market Outcomes?”, 2006, National Institute of Economic and Social Research London, <http://niesr.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/061006_91251.pdf>, accessed 12 December 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ruth Bridgstock, “The graduate attributes we’ve overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills,” In: Higher Education Research and Development, 28/1/2009, **DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360802444347> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sue Cranmer, “Enhancing Graduate Employability: best intentions and mixed outcomes,” In: Studies in Higher Education, 31/2/2006, DOI [10.1080/03075070600572041](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572041) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The University of Edinburgh- Employability Initiative, “Why is employability important?” <http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/Why/>, accessed 26 July 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example Keith F Punch, *Introduction to Social Research*, 2nd Ed, (Los Angeles, London: Sage, 2005), 160-165; also William Foote Whyte (ed), *Participatory Action Research* (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1991); Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, *Action Research in Higher Education* (London: Kogan Page Limited, 1992) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See for example Rosaline S. Barber and Jenny Kitzinger, eds, *Developing Focus Group Research* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 199); Thomas L. Greenbaum, The Handbook for Focus Group Research, 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage,1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Participation was voluntary, all transcripts were anonymised. All aspects of the research had ethical approval, and followed the ethical guidelines for research with human participants [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Particularly useful here is Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, *Action Research in Higher Education* (London: Kogan Page Limited, 1992) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Oxford Brookes University, “Enhancing Graduate Employability,” <http://www.enhancingemployability.org.uk/graduate_employability_inventory.php>, accessed 8 August 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)