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Evaluating the use of enterprise to create synergies between graduate skills development, career management and successful induction

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Title:	Evaluating the use of enterprise to create synergies between graduate skills development, career management and successful induction
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Description:	<p>Aims of Project:</p> <p>We planned an evaluative study into the use of the entrepreneurial visual planning tool 'XING' in the 'FLUX' competition format (Working Knowledge, 2011) during induction week at a University of Plymouth Colleges (UPC) Partner. This college is one of 18 working in partnership with the University to provide Higher Education (HE), primarily in the form of Foundation Degrees (FDs), in a Further Education (FE) environment. Foundations degrees were designed to bring together academic and vocational experiences by building on the principles of employer engagement and work-based learning. Entry to HE has been acknowledged as a stressful time for undergraduates as they adjust to a new educational environment, social groupings and academic expectations (Edward, 2003). For HE in FE students this transition has to consider the scope of the foundation degree, preparing them for the academic as well as the professional education they will undergo. With these issues in mind, the project itself aimed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Explore the potential of employing XING to ease students' transition into HE; ○ Raise students' awareness of the synergies between academic study, graduate skills and the workplace; ○ Raise awareness amongst staff involved in the delivery of UPC programmes of the potential for using activities such as XING during induction to build peer networks and introduce graduate skills. <p>Background to / Context of Project:</p> <p>A positive experience during the induction period is perceived as influencing undergraduates' retention and academic achievement during their period of study (Hargreaves, 1998). Induction needs to prepare students for the transitions they will (Hussey and Smith's (2010). FDs, provided in primarily-FE environments, provide HE to a diverse student body (HEFCE 2006) with the need to fulfil the task of "... develop[ing] key skills and employability, and offer[ing]</p>

clear routes into the labour market ...” whilst including academic-study to ensure the effectiveness of routes into “... further learning” (Blunkett, 2000). The highly conceptual nature of all of this poses risks for students’ perceptions of the value of their HE, which was born out in recent research where many UPC FD students did not appreciate the value of their course in relation to career development (Dismore et al, 2010). As recognised in the literature, there is therefore need to enhance support for students to make the link between academic study and employment (Hicks et al, 2009), as well as pedagogic research focus on these ‘non traditional’ student experiences (Leese, 2010). Two sources within the literature, Anderson and Krathwohl’s (2001) revised approach to cognitive taxonomy and Harvey et al’s (1997) report on graduate employability, have proved useful for identifying synergies between employability and academic study. Harvey et al’s (1997) three levels of employee contribution (‘adaptive’, ‘adaptable’ and ‘transformative’) align progressively with Anderson and Krathwohl’s (2001) cognitive processes, which in turn can be applied to two types of knowledge and skills: 1. subject specific, and 2. transformative, generic or abstract. The former is generally the purpose of assignments, the ‘task’, and the latter is generally incidental to that purpose (Cherney, 2008) and driven by the ‘prescribed approach’. One such approach, or particular interest is group work, which not only develops specific abstract attributes that align with social transitions but can also aid in academic and personal transitions, as described by “social-cultural theories” (Martin, 2005); a collective title for a breadth of theories supported in a wealth of literature as a factor in successful transition both into and through HE (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Surowiecki, 2004; Edward, 2001; Mackie, 2001; Lund and Smørdal, 2006; Wheeler et al 2008; Leese 2010).

Although it is not possible for cross-course induction activities to focus closely on subject specific knowledge and skills, due to obvious cognate differences and variations in requisite knowledge prior to any specific HE teaching, it is possible to focus on abstract, generic and transferable skills, their place in HE and the synergies with employability. XING is a visual planning tool that leads students through the key decisions in business planning, and a competition format which employs group work, idea generation, time constraints, communication with experts, and presentations through a focus on the commercialisation of ideas. Undertaken in an HE environment the objective is to align academic study with commercial awareness and the importance of developing abstract skills and attributes, which was the basis for this induction activity.

Methods Used:

A constructivist approach (Rust et al, 2005) was adopted to engage students in activity that would enable interaction with

peers, staff and employers to develop and construct personalised meaning of their new environment and programme of study (Edward, 2001). Employing XING in a competition format, the day involved new FD students from three programme areas. The largest grouping represented business related programmes; the second grouping was from a social science programme and the third grouping from sports sciences. A two-stage evaluation was undertaken with students, a questionnaire, comprising of both open and closed questions captured event experiences and awareness of skills employed on the day. A reflective questionnaire completed eight to twelve weeks later, required students to consider the wider application of these skills. Data were analysed thematically, with iterative cycles of analysis undertaken to inform later stages of data collection (e.g. stage 2 of the students questionnaire / tutor interviews) Tutors involved in supporting student participation in the induction event were interviewed with the emergent themes from the student data used as the basis for the semi-structured interviews. Employers were also asked to complete a questionnaire and teaching staff from the college were interviewed.

Results

Stage 1 (at time of the event):

The majority of students identified undertaking the event as a positive social experience and considered their awareness of relevance of skills such as communication, (e.g. with peers / professionals) team working, decision making and problem solving to their HE studies as increased through the day's activities.

The purpose and significance of the event for HE, as a business/ activity, was clear for the majority of the business students. The social science students focused in particular on the team-working aspect of the activity. In comparison the sports students responded negatively both directly through the questionnaires and indirectly through their tutor, who was interviewed. Those interviews with staff did, however, indicate that the different cohorts had undergone different preparation for the day, with the business and social science tutors echoing the students' responses and the sports tutor commenting that the staff in this area were insufficiently informed and that only limited information was passed onto the students. Not surprisingly this therefore had an impact on students participation in this area.

Stage 2 (post event):

This concentrated on the business and social science students. They reflected on the value of the event in terms of allowing them to settle into their course and work with peers at an early stage, assisting in future group and peer working activities.

Through categorisation of the students' responses, relating to applying skills from the day in their FDs, differences were

	<p>identified between the social science and business students. The social science students provided reflection on further development and application, within their studies, of the skills they had identified from the day. In comparison the business students who demonstrated heightened awareness of the skills, but had reflected less on how and where these had been developed and applied through their course.</p> <p>Analysis and interpretation of the results is ongoing, for the purpose of further dissemination. However, findings and conclusions at this point are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The event was successful in aiding in social transitions for HE in FE FD students during their induction week. ○ Raising of student awareness of the synergies between academic study, graduate skills and the workplace varied across cohorts of students. Likewise staff awareness and appreciation of the activity, as an induction tool for introducing graduate skills influenced their students, also varied across the subject areas. ○ Understanding and awareness of tutors prior and during the event, and then subsequently during the students' reflection process, varied. Whilst the process and purpose on the day was made reasonably clear it could be argued that is too short an assimilation period to conceptualise and contextualise the activity. Thus it may be suggested that a more systematic approach should be employed to ensure the process is understood, and potentially more rigid procedures should be developed for communicating, conceptualising and contextualising the messages for both tutors during planning and for new students prior to, during and after the event.
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