

ARTICULATING EXCELLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF DESIGN AND EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

In today's highly competitive graduate marketplace, employability is at the top of the agenda for many academic institutions. At a time when the costs associated with higher education are increasing, the value of attending higher education is being scrutinized more than ever. During open days parents of applicants regularly ask questions indicating how much they value the employability aspects of a programme. According to the CBI, "employers are looking beyond simple academic achievement when considering applicants for a job or internship. Employability covers a broad range of non-academic or softer skills and abilities, which are of value in the workplace. It includes the ability to work in a team; a willingness to demonstrate initiative and original thought; self-discipline in starting and completing tasks to deadline."

Attributes such as original thought, problem solving, innovation, creativity, and teamwork are complex skills which employers' value but are difficult to evidence and articulate.

This paper reports a case study of a level three design based assignment, which provides an opportunity for students to reflect upon the qualities they have personally gained through their time at university and to practice communicating and evidencing those skills. The paper covers how the assignment is delivered including engagement with employers and methods of assessment.

Keywords: Employability, employers, communication, careers, skills

1 INTRODUCTION

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching at a leading UK University states that she 'wants to ensure that every undergraduate and taught postgraduate student is able to recognise, articulate and make better use of the skills and abilities they derive from their academic courses.'

How do we include learning in aspects of employability in our core subject areas to complement, rather than compromise our existing curriculum?

To be effective during the selection and interview process, graduates need to be able to recognise, evaluate and select both transferable and course specific skills relative to a specific role and articulate them eloquently to both specialist and non-specialist audiences. The 'Skills Challenge' was introduced to Level 3 Product Design Students three years ago to help them not only recognise and value the skills they have developed, but also to enable them to effectively communicate those skills and attributes to employers. It has proved to be an excellent way to encourage students to engage with potential employers and to research the qualities employers are looking for.

2 PROGRAMME AND CONTEXT OF LEARNING

The Product Design MDES programme sits within the School of Mechanical Engineering. The course website offers a description of the benefits of the program, "Our innovative multi-disciplinary degree course in Product Design has been developed to produce skilled, creative designers who understand both aesthetics and technology, key attributes identified by many leading employers in the sector. It bridges the gap between visual-arts-led and engineering-led product design courses and gives Leeds graduates a significant advantage by equipping them with a wider variety of employment opportunities" (University of Leeds, 2009)

The Professional, Portfolio & Industry Awareness module, is a 20-credit module offered at Level 3. Approximately 40-50 students typically enroll on the module. Tutors from Product Design and the Careers Service deliver the Module jointly. It covers the typical elements of careers preparation such as CV's, Interview techniques and lectures about opportunities for graduates. Running alongside this

curriculum based learning are faculty based employability sessions where external employers visit to present their requirements for graduates.

3 PARTNERSHIP WITH CAREERS SERVICE

Watts, (2006) states that attitudes within teaching departments to the need for career development learning, and to whose responsibility it is to provide such learning, tend to vary depending on the nature of the course.

During previous years, product design students were only offered optional, non-assessed careers lectures with a view to supporting them in their selection of and applications for employment. However, the following issues were highlighted.

- Attendance was low and sporadic dictated by workloads on assessed modules.
- Informal feedback from the students indicated that the information produced was too general to suit their needs.
- Feedback from leaving students was that more specific support in terms of Interviews, writing CVs creating portfolios was required.

In Product Design we took the decision to embed employability within our curriculum with focused learning outcomes and assessed assignments. We believed very strongly that an involvement with the careers service was essential to bring the necessary skills and experience to our programme.

Traditionally Product Design programs have been largely vocational, created to prepare students for a career specifically in the discipline. The Product Design BDES & MDES program at the University of Leeds has a broader base. This module supports those wishing to follow a career in the creative industries, product design or product development. However given the broader base of the program and having students with individual (and changing) ambitions the module is designed to have a degree of flexibility to accommodate the personal interests and diversity of job types a graduate could pursue.

4 TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS

A G Watts (2006) states that, “The teaching and learning methods used in career development learning need to meet at least two major requirements:

- They need to be personally engaging, and therefore based on active involvement of students and use of interactive teaching and learning methods.
- They need to make the world of work ‘become “real”’ and therefore include active involvement of employers and, where possible, direct experiences of work.

There are many such interactive methods, role play, peer review, buzz group discussions, problem based methods, self directed learning.”

The Careers Service recommended a presentation format in the form of the ‘Skills Challenge’ team activity. Each team identifies a ‘live’ job opportunity, researches information on the requirements of the position and then creates a team presentation to highlighting the specific skills and the transferable skills, which apply to the position.

As a starting point for the ‘Skills Challenge’, students need to specify and research their chosen company. Therefore it is essential, and to a large extent unavoidable, for the students to do anything but engage with subject matter of the assignment. The self-directed, team and problem based method makes the assignment incredibly interactive. The students react with an enthusiasm often beyond the value of the credits.

Race, (2006) argues that “evidence of employability needs to arise from purposefully designed learning by doing activities, including plenty of opportunity to learn by trial and error in safe environments – mock interview panels, CV selection panels and so on”.

CV's and interview techniques are assessed in separate assignments to the skills challenge.

One of the aims was to expand the blinkered thinking of students that a degree in Product Design could only be applied to a narrow employer market.

Away from *There is a predetermined set of characteristics every employer wants me to show.*

Towards *I should be aware of the skills I have and present them tailor them to each employer.*

Away from *I must find a job as a Product Designer*

Towards *What can I do with the skills I have?*

Table 1 maps the desired learning outcomes against proposed teaching activities. These tables were used as the basis of discussions regarding the module with the Careers Service. A number of lectures were selected to meet many of the learning outcomes within the module. Of particular relevance to this paper are learning outcomes 4 & 5. A different learning method was required to deliver this deeper learning.

Table 1.

Learning outcome / Content Matrix

	Carriers Service support and where	Writing CVs & Covering letters	Transferable Skills Analysis.	Interview techniques	Enterprise & self employment	Employers viewpoints	Portfolio content and presentation	Communication of projects	BDES MDES skills analysis
1..... to be sufficiently familiar with the structure of contemporary CVs and letters of application in order to be able to formulate a tailored CV and letter of application for a specified position.		*							
2..... to be able to make an informed choice of career path, locate sources of adverts for chosen positions and specify the entry level criteria.	*		*		*	*			
3..... sufficiently familiar with the services and support offered from the University Careers Service to be able to make good use the services.	*								
4..... to be able to recognize, evaluate and select transferable and specific skills and relative to a specific role and present them to a non specialist audience or potential employers.			*	*			*	*	*
5..... to be able to recognize their own discipline specific skills and transferable skills of value to an employer.			*						*
6..... to be able to select project based work and compile it into a portfolio to demonstrate a range of skills.							*	*	
7..... to be able to present project based work to demonstrate a range of skills an uninformed audience such as a potential employer.							*	*	*
8..... to be able to compile a portfolio to visually communicate evidence of skills to potential employers.							*	*	

According to Bloom (1956) Analysing (Investigating, distinguishing, explaining), Evaluating (deciding, debating and justifying) and Creating (devising, proposing, formulating) are higher order thinking activities. The format of the Skills Challenge relies on self-directed team research, debate and analysis of their own skills compared to those of an employer, and the devising of some form of presentation to propose those skills.

This relates well to the learning outcomes and demanded the higher level thinking expected from level 3 students. Team/students have the opportunity to personalise the focus of their work and respond in creative ways to a wide variety of employment opportunities each with unique skills requirements.

Exposure to a wider variety of employment opportunities presented via extra curricular employer presentations plus a greater understanding and valuing of transferrable skills developed during the skills challenge has proved to be an effective mix.

5 PRACTICALITIES OF THE ASSIGNMENT AND ASSESSMENT

The practicalities of the assignment are explained by way of text provided to students.

Overall Aim:

The object of this team activity is to select an organisation, company or occupational sector and present a 'stand' which clearly markets the skills Leeds University PDES graduates have to offer that organisation. These may be 'degree specific' skills, but are more likely to be the generic skills employers are seeking, and with which your degree study has equipped you (e.g. teamwork, problem solving). The emphasis is on an up-beat presentation that will persuade an employer that you, as a Leeds graduate, have attributes that the organisation 'must have'. Your task is to assemble your 'stand' in the Design Studio to be visited and assessed by tutors, students and employers. The presentation could include but is not limited to graphic displays, role play, song and dance routines.

The cohort is split into around 10 teams of 4-5 students and a presentation deadline set for three weeks time. For the presentation, each team is provided with a blank tabletop display panel and a space to create their 'stand'. Students typically produce printed posters or other materials to display their skills.

5.1 Assessment

A Judging panel of 10-12 people is made up of academics, employers and careers center staff. The judges split up and independently watch the presentations. Each Judge may view 6-8 of the presentations during the 90 minute session with each team of students giving a presentation their 'stand' five or six times to different judges.

Assessment is based on the following four criteria with scores for each recorded by each judge along with comments.

Presentation, creativity and persuasive nature of display 30%

Evidence of skills necessary for the company 30%

Quality of group preparation and presentation 30%

Use of sources 10%

The multiple presentation format works well with students given the opportunity to practice their delivery several times. This format can be resource heavy on numbers of staff. In order to reduce the number of judges required the format can be changed with the teams presenting only once to one panel using, for example, PowerPoint. This also reduces print costs for students.



Figure 1. Students presenting on the Skills Challenge

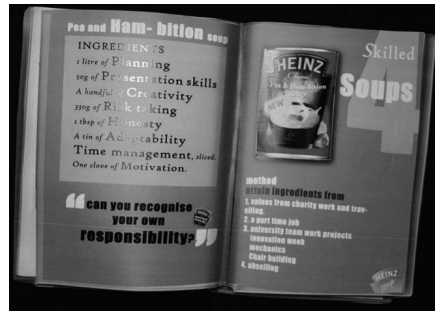


Figure 2 Employability soups “Team-ato” and “Pea & Hambition Soup”

Figure 1 shows the display panel created by one team students and figure 2 shows how this team decided to use their creative skills to present their qualities in the form of ingredients for new soup varieties, “Team-ato” and “Pea & Hambition Soup”. Other teams have used role play in the style of “The Apprentice”, used toys as metaphors for teamwork or made fresh sandwiches to represent their different skill sets.

6 RESULTS

Results are presented in two forms, firstly written recommendations from current students and graduates who have taken part in the module and also a survey taken before and after the module had taken place to evaluate the impact of learning. Written recommendations are shown below

Quote from a graduate who had secured a position

“The presentation team project (Skills Challenge) - makes you understand what you are good at and what potential you have.”

What did undergraduates say they thought it was useful for?

Understanding of what companies want.

Assessing company values

Learning what my exact degree specific skills are

Confidence under pressure

Confidence in presenting yourself to other people

Understanding and applying specific skills learned

Applying skills employers are looking for

Confidence in understanding what employers are looking for from graduates

Confidence tailoring generic skills for job applications

How to tailor my skills to a job role

Figure 4 shows the results of a survey of participants before and after the ‘Skills Challenge’ had taken place. We asked the students how confident they were in relation to articulating their generic skills to employers. It can be seen from the chart that before the session there was a low level of confidence. Following the ‘Skills Challenge’ there is a noticeable shift in confidence to either quite confident or very confident.

Figure 5 shows the level in confidence in relation to their understanding what employers are looking for and their ability to tailor their generic skills to a particular job application.

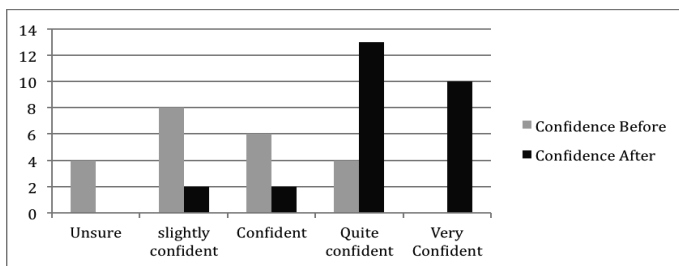


Figure 3. How confident do you feel about articulating your generic skills?

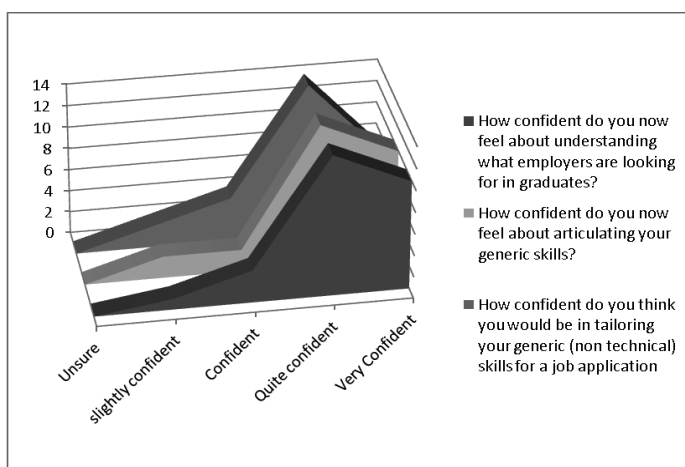


Figure 4. Confidence in articulating skills after the learning

7 CONCLUSION, REFLECTION AND DEVELOPMENTS

Our experience of implementing the 'Skills Challenge' as an assessed activity embedded within our programme curriculum has been extremely positive. From the results it is apparent that the assignment builds understanding in what employers are looking for and confidence in articulating those skills to employers. It is hoped that this provides student with a distinct advantage during the recruitment process.

The combined set up and assessment is short at only 3 hours but is heavy on resource in terms of location and staff. I have made suggestions in the paper to reduce this however this may also reduce impact of the session and affect the feeling of immediacy and 'theatre' that the live judging with unfamiliar external assessors generates. The resource required is an important consideration but the value of the outcomes appears to outweigh the commitment of resource required. The important aspects of the activity in my view are the opportunity of repetition of the same employer focused presentation, combined with presenting to external judges. Repetition allows the students to refine what they say and how they say it from the first tentative presentation to the last delivery of the sessions where they have had chance to test and refine their 'performance'. Having the external judges encourages the students to shift their mindset and present employer focused skills in an appropriate language suitable for a non expert audience. To improve the learning it would be good to try to utilise the enthusiasm, energy and buzz which is present directly following the session and try to capture the key learning from each group. Perhaps this could be in the form of a reflective written or oral report prepared by the group immediately following their last presentation. The student teams only experience their own presentation have no opportunity to experience their own or other presentations from the viewpoint of the audience. It is possible that these could be captured on video and used in a reflective activity.

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