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Promoting employability in the curriculum: testing the assumptions

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Background and rationale

From the Dearing Report to the Government's recent White Paper - *The Future of Higher Education* - higher education has been under mounting pressures to respond positively to the issue of graduate employability. Concerns have been raised about the extent to which the HE sector manages to supply suitably skilled graduates in the workplace (Hall et al, 2002). HEFCE have recently funded several research projects which explore the connections between higher education, work experience and graduate employability (Blasko et al., 2002; CHERI, 2002; Mason et al., 2003). It is evident therefore, that a number of higher education institutions are already focussing attention on this issue, as indeed, are students themselves (McInnes, 2001).

In addition, the current financial pressures on students have meant that many work in a range of jobs whilst simultaneously studying for degrees (Moxley et. al., 2001). This is as true of the students at the University of Wolverhampton as elsewhere. Courses therefore need to be designed to meet the changing learning needs of students and "help bridge bridges between the world of work and the world of academic preparation" (Moxley et al, 2001:125).

Various forms of work and community related learning have traditionally been seen as a key strategy in strengthening employability (Boud and Solomon, 2001). Within the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences (HLSS) at the University of Wolverhampton, a number of initiatives in discipline based work related learning (WRL) have been developed with the aim of providing relevant skills and enhancing the undergraduate experience (Cameron and Green, 1996, 1997; Hall, D et al, 2002) The opportunities for work related learning are many, diverse and complex (Ileris, 2003).

The need therefore, for a critical evaluation of this work in HLSS, together with an assessment of both students' and employers' perceptions of employability, was recognised. It was acknowledged that there was no real evaluation of the work placement provision; end of module evaluations did not capture this and whilst staff had devised their own ways of monitoring such provision, they did not necessarily ask students to reflect on the employability aspect of the provision. Such information that did exist operated at the level of individual modules with no real evaluation of provision across the breadth of the School's provision. Whilst the School is recognised as one of the sector leaders in the development of WRL and has pockets of excellence in relation to WRL provision, it was felt that such provision had not expanded as much as was expected within the School, and that it was still a minority of staff who were involved in developing and driving such activities. Furthermore, the development of more vocational courses in the School, such as Social Care, Creative and Professional Writing and development of modules in Public Relations and Broadcast Journalism within the Media Studies portfolio, opened up the potential for new possibilities for WRL within the School.

The aims of the research were firstly to identify and explore the assumptions which had informed curriculum planning within those modules that appeared to offer employability skills in both vocational and non-vocational subjects within HLSS. Why had subjects decided

to design such provision? Was it driven by employability agendas? Did such provision help students get jobs? Secondly, the research sought to ascertain graduates' and current students' perceptions of the relevance of existing employment-related provision within HLSS and finally, to identify any alternative provision which past and present students and academic staff felt would enhance student employability. This report details the research project and its findings, highlighting the need for strategic support from the University and a higher profile for WRL within both HLSS and the University more generally.

The research

The project was intended to gather qualitative research data to develop a concrete knowledge base for future curriculum planning in HLSS in relation to student employability. Academic staff, current students' and graduates' views were sought. Acknowledging that there appeared to be a mismatch between the needs of employers and current graduate skills, work was started on developing a framework for strategically enhancing links with employers to contribute to employability strategies and curriculum development in HLSS. By raising the profile of graduate employability there was an expectation that subject areas would begin to critically evaluate their provision.

The project benefited from being able to draw on the expertise of a consultancy group whose membership reflected the diversity of the School, and indeed across the University. This group included staff located within Social Science subjects, professional Social Work, the Co-ordinator of the Active Community Fund, a member of the School management team, and staff from the Career Development Service.

An Employers forum was also established representing Wolverhampton Local Authority, a large Housing Association and a private retail company. Both groups advised and contributed to the development of the research.

The evaluation of provision was based on one level 1 module, three level 2 and three level 3 modules plus Student Link provision in subjects across the School. The types of provision ranged from work based activities i.e. compulsory work placements in case of Social Work provision, to optional placements in the case of Student Link, the volunteering and history modules, to non-work based provision which nonetheless incorporate teaching and assessment activities seemingly appropriate to employability. The Career Development and Learning module was also included.

- 1 A postal questionnaire was sent to students graduating in 2001/2 who had undertaken the identified modules; this was followed up by a telephone survey. A shorter version of the questionnaire was incorporated in a survey to graduates 12 months after completion initiated by the Career Development Service.
- 2 A questionnaire was issued to all current students who had recently completed the WRL modules.
- 3 A questionnaire was circulated to subject areas within the School running a module to do with employability, and a separate one to those areas that were not.
- 4 An employability skills survey was conducted on our behalf by the Human Resources Department of Wolverhampton Local Authority.

The outcomes

The questionnaire returns were as follows:

Graduates (2001/02)	87 returns
Current students	86 returns
Subject areas	85% return

Take-up of WRL provision

Students at the University of Wolverhampton are most likely to be the first generation taking up higher education, and as such arrive with an expectation that a degree will confer wider and better employment prospects. However, the research found that the proportion of HLSS students on non-professional programmes taking-up WRL modules is low – approximately 5-8% of the School's undergraduate population. Clearly the School has the capacity to improve upon this performance indicator.

Whilst there has been some expansion of non compulsory WRL in HLSS, e.g. via Student Link or the development of the Work Study in History module, the School's provision remains concentrated, and is taken up mostly by students within social science subjects. Moreover, only a small number of staff are engaged in such WRL activities.

Assumptions underpinning curriculum planning

From the survey of subjects it is clear that most, though not all, subjects in HLSS are keen to promote and address graduate employment. Existing provision had been developed within subjects with this as one of its aims. However, these subject-based initiatives have, and continue to develop in an ad-hoc fashion and are not informed by any strategic planning or resources at School or University levels.

HLSS staff felt that in relation to the skills and competencies required by employers they were operating on guess work. In some subjects there was an assumption that Key Skills would, in and of themselves, promote and enhance graduate employability. Staff also noted that the lack of good reliable data on graduate employment destinations seriously hampered curriculum development. Interested staff appeared to work in isolation with little to no discussion within subject teams of issues surrounding graduate employability. The majority of staff felt strongly that provision developed to enhance student employability should be subject specific – this view is reinforced and supported by the graduate and student returns and by the Careers Development Service.

Graduates' and current students' perceptions of WRL provision in HLSS

The vast majority of students who had taken WRL modules did so with a view to enhancing their employability. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the quality of provision and the relevance of the WRL modules in relation to employability. This is supported by the Careers Service survey of graduates 12 months after graduation which revealed a slightly higher level of student satisfaction than the University average, with HLSS employability type modules.

For some students specific modules had enabled them to get involved in work they were interested in as a career and enhanced their CVs. Some graduates found employment with the organisation they had conducted their work placements in. Others found that the non-work based provision nonetheless helped them to gain insights into what employers want or helped them develop a range of employment related skills. A key finding is that the WRL provision seemed to benefit those students who, from an early stage, had a clearly mapped employment path.

Employability skills

We asked graduates, students, staff and employers what they thought were the most important skills and competencies for gaining graduate employment and found some shared understanding and some mismatch between the parties.

Current students and Graduates

Current students emphasised the importance of communication skills, work placement/experience, teamwork, interview skills. Graduates in turn emphasised interview skills, CV design, writing for non-academic audiences, work placements/experience.

For the graduates and students the skills and competencies tended to be specifically related to the module they had undertaken and were not necessarily based upon any wider understanding of employers' needs. The students had difficulty in either recognising and/or translating the skills and competencies gained in WRL and in wider academic provision more generally, to employment contexts.

The Employers (Local Authority survey and Employers Forum)

Employers placed emphasis on interpersonal skills, communication skills, analytical skills and project management skills.

HLSS Staff

Some HLSS subject staff felt the integration of key and thereby transferable skills into the curriculum was in and of itself enough to deliver graduate employability.

Other staff recognised that Key Skills were not sufficient and constituted only part of the employability agenda. Staff also identified a language issue in how the School/University labels skills and competencies in university documentation such as module guides, module and programme specifications; there was deemed to be a mismatch between the language used by academics and that used by employers. This creates problems for students in recognising the appropriate skills and in being able to translate them into the world of employment.

Alternative provision to enhance employability

Graduates and students were asked to identify any alternative provision which they felt the School/University should provide to further enhance student employability. The majority of students seemed to find it difficult to see skills development occurring across the curriculum and tended to phrase their answers in relation to the module(s) taken. Work placement/experience was considered very important however by those who had completed such a module and for those not having such a placement they felt their module would have been enhanced by this provision.

The majority felt that there needed to be more emphasis on skills based provision. Bringing the world of work into the academic curriculum through practical case study work and outside speakers was also seen as important. Most noted the need for the further development of presentation and interview skills, in writing job applications and in the construction of CVs. A number of students felt that career guidance at an earlier stage would have been useful. Of interest is the number of students who commented that more students needed to take the WRL provision currently available within the School.

Career development

In relation to career development and the planning of programmes of study there was a singular lack of intervention by staff in bringing these modules to the attention of students, or indeed of any discussion with students about future careers. In conjunction with this the majority of students felt that discussion of careers was only applicable in the context of the Career Development Service. Even here there seemed to be some misunderstanding on the part of students about the nature of the advice and guidance offered by the Service, a significant number stating that they had not used the Service because they had not yet decided which career they wished to pursue.

Summary

The development of employability skills and career enhancement for students is either not regarded by academic staff as relevant to their role and/or they do not feel confident that they have the necessary expertise to advise students on career paths. Some WRL provision does currently exist for students within the School and the University but students' attention is not drawn to it by staff to any great extent, and the overall proportion of students on non vocational courses taking up such modules in the School is small. Staff and students felt strongly that the development of any such provision needed to be subject specific, and this may be reflected in the low take up of some of the more generic modules.

There is a mismatch between the perceptions of staff/students and those of employers as to which skills are important. This underlines the distance that some staff felt currently existed between academics and employers. It is possible that the skills that employers require are already being developed in the curriculum, but that they are either not made explicit, or insufficient emphasis is placed on them or that the language used to describe them does not allow students to see their relevance in both academic and employment contexts. Even within the WRL provision that is more explicitly aimed at employability, students often seemed to fail to understand their relevance to the world of work. The need to build in reflection on WRL elements of modules was reinforced by students and graduates throughout the research. There was general agreement that consideration of career and skill development needed to begin at level one. Students/graduates felt that academic modules needed to place more emphasis on the development of skills, noting that assessment of such skills was necessary in enabling them to evidence their competence to future employers.

Benefits and evaluation

The research has provided qualitative data from a selection of the major stakeholders in higher education. It is generally agreed that the issue of graduate employability is high on the agenda of every University in the country and is of particular concern to those Schools and subject areas that are not immediately seen as vocationally relevant. The research has provided useful information that can be used to inform curriculum planning within such subject areas. The Consultancy group has brought together major players within the School, University and local employers, which has allowed for a wide ranging debate to occur. The pooling of information and experience has resulted in the generation of creative ideas for the future development of WRL within the School. A framework has been developed for strategically enhancing links with employers.

A substantial amount of useful information has been gathered, and although this reflects the findings of research in other similar institutions, it also provides us with knowledge more pertinent to developments in our own University and School.

Future developments

School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences

The School of Humanities Languages and Social Sciences is very diverse both within student cohorts, modes of study and the subjects and awards offered. Unlike more cohesive Schools, one solution will not fit all. In looking for ways forward it will be necessary to consider flexible ways of delivering a variety of pathways that students might chose to follow in order to build and evidence a skills and experience profile. This will require curriculum development, expansion of work experience provision (particularly in the humanities), and some consideration of the role of the subject area/tutor in this development.

To these ends members of the Consultancy Group have met with the School's Senior Management Team and a number of short and longer term recommendations (not noted here) have been proposed. The following developments were agreed for immediate action:

1. *Employers Forum* – this to continue with expansion of the existing group. Aim - to consult on curriculum development, the creation of traineeships/sponsorships, and appropriately targeted career fairs.
2. *Development of skills and career development* - Develop and pilot an Employability Progress File within the School.
3. *Raise the profile of career development*
 - Produce publicity for new students advertising current WRL provision available within the School and University.
 - Production of a skills audit sheet and information on the ways in which skills might be developed via the curriculum. This to be used in level 1 tutorials across the School by the end of semester 1 2003/4.
4. *Work placement/experience* – Extend the range of placement opportunities available in “Student Link” modules through the development of the Research Shop.
5. *Strategic development* – Create a sub group of the HLSS Learning and Teaching Committee to bring together those personnel running and developing work related learning across the School. Aim of the group is to look at further ways of developing provision, especially in the humanities and overcoming existing barriers, as identified by this research, to student take-up of WRL provision.
6. *Funding* – Research possible funding streams for the development of this area of work.

The University

Work Related Learning, especially at the work placement end of the provision, is a time consuming activity for staff and students and if it is to be successfully expanded in the University then the activity needs greater resource input and needs to be developed and resourced *strategically* at both School and University levels; a more coherent infrastructure is required to support the development of WRL. In particular, this research demonstrates that such action is urgently required in the University’s interface with employers where it is noted that some employers are overwhelmed with requests for student placements whilst other employers are never approached and do not know how to access information about placements.

There is a need for greater communication about the range of existing WRL activities going on in the University. There is an urgent need for some joined-up thinking between the different Schools and a sharing of best practice; there is no point in each School reinventing the WRL wheel!

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