

Enhancing graduate attributes and employability through initiatives with external partners

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Abstract

This research explores how projects with external partners can help enhance the employability-related attributes of higher education students, and is based on a combination of prior literature and an institutional initiative using projects as an alternative to the well-respected dissertation. Initiatives between higher education institutions and external organisations exist in many forms and the students in this research are shown to improve their understanding of the needs of external organisations, while enhancing their self-confidence and team-working abilities. The degree programme studied is in its sixth year and good balances of students have chosen between the project and dissertation options, slightly more the former. In addition to supporting the development of the students' employability-related attributes, outward-facing activities such as these are also potentially of help to the higher education institution itself as the student experience is enriched and this ultimately supports any efforts being made to rise up many of the university ranking schemes.

Keywords: graduate, student, external, partners, employability, attributes, project.

Introduction

With the imminent arrival of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), as outlined by the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE, 2016), it is clear that measures of teaching excellence are to be introduced across the higher education (HE) sector. Initial signs are that metrics based on National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes

and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports are likely to play a significant role. However, such sources have their limitations and relying too much on these could have a counter-productive effect on the evolution of innovative teaching initiatives across HE, as the focus could be diverted away from long-term embedded initiatives to short-term fixes that satisfy short-term metrics. This research aims to highlight one such innovation, the benefits of which may be most pronounced in the years following those initial NSS and HESA measures, and is based on the work presented by the author at the Enhancing Student Learning Through Innovative Scholarship Conference held at University College London (UCL) in 2016 (UCL, 2016). The conference hosted a series of presentations by colleagues from disciplines across the HE sector to highlight initiatives that have a positive impact on the student experience. The objective here is to add to the growing bank of knowledge and help drive further forward the evolution of teaching at university levels.

HE student engagements with external organisations

To identify opportunities that could help improve the student experience, alongside a plethora of other initiatives, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) internationally are turning their attention towards enhancing their relationships with a whole range of external organisations across the public, private and voluntary sectors (Barnett, 2014; Chartered Management Institute, 2014; Cole, 2016; Kettle, 2013; Kelchan & Meadows, 2016; Mourshed et al, 2012; Quality Assurance Agency, 2014; Wilson 2012; Young, 2014). These types of initiatives can be of benefit, not only to the students, but also to the HEI and the external body (O'Leary, 2015). For students, key benefits that can arise from their interactions with external organisations include further learning from new experiences that build upon what they have learnt during their degree, experiencing new environments and different approaches to solving challenges, working with others and seeing how they could apply their knowledge and capabilities in different ways, a whole series of attributes often highlighted by employers as the sorts of attributes that they are seeking in graduates. Such collaborations between HEIs and external organisations are managed in a variety of ways across the sector (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012), sometimes via a central unit at the HEI such as an Enterprise Hub, Innovation Centre or Incubator, directly through a Faculty or Department, using

specialist academics embedded in the curriculum, in conjunction with the Careers Services group, or by involving the variety of student societies or clubs that exist.

Employability-related issues in higher education

Particularly with the advent of rising student fees across HE, graduate employability is an increasingly important measure for the stakeholders in the sector, especially the HEIs and its students (O'Leary, 2016). This has been the case for some years now and the Higher Education Academy's (2012) definition of employability highlights both an improved probability of success for the student in accessing a chosen field as well as signalling the benefits that can accrue for multiple stakeholders:

A set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Employability-related support exists in many forms in the HE sector; it may be included across the suite of mandatory and optional modules within the degree, through group work initiatives, in individual placement and volunteering opportunities, and through the various services offered by Careers or similar. An experiential, rather than just theoretical approach, has been advocated (Herrmann et al, 2008) as a better way to develop the key attributes required. The development of skills is often emphasised (Andrews & Higson, 2008) with distinctions made between soft-skills and hard-skills, the former including relatively subjective issues such as reliability, coping with uncertainty, strategic thinking, communication, creativity and confidence, while the latter is more objective and could include expertise in finance or marketing for example, analytical and problem-solving abilities. Others extend the issue beyond just skills (Knight & Yorke, 2002) and suggest that such issues are best introduced early on in the curriculum so that they can then be reinforced during the degree, while other research (Rae, 2010) indicates a growing emphasis for graduate attributes based on teamwork, social awareness, ethics, sustainability and grassroots enterprise.

The emergence of alternatives to the final-year dissertation

The final major piece of degree work in HE can be categorised into three different types; a dissertation, a project or an exhibition in various forms. There is variation across arts, humanities, sciences, technology, engineering, social sciences, management and other disciplines, but the well-established research-based dissertation is relatively common across academia as a whole, the basic premise being that it provides an opportunity for the student to demonstrate an understanding of, and potentially make a contribution towards, the subject knowledge. Along with the rest of the degree content, this then prepares the student for further study toward a potential academic career or acts as a platform for a career in other fields, and this works well for many students.

Nevertheless, HE has changed significantly over recent years, with increased numbers of students, a greater diversity in the student body and clear demands for employability-related support (O'Leary, 2016), and therefore projects and exhibitions may offer the opportunity to recognise a broader range of talents and abilities than dissertations alone do.

At the same time as student numbers in HE have risen, improved links between universities and business have been advocated (Wilson, 2012) and such evaluations of the collaboration between universities and businesses emphasise the importance for students of workplace experience, such as placements, internships and similar employer-based initiatives to help further develop the attributes, skills and knowledge for future employment. Many others support this view (Driffield et al, 2011; Reddy & Moores, 2006; Confederation of British Industry and Universities United Kingdom, 2009; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Archer & Davison, 2008; Rae, 2007; Little & Harvey, 2006; Milburn, 2006) while others emphasise an even broader notion of attributes (Barrie, 2004 and 2007; Bridgstock, 2009; Donleavy, 2012; Green et al, 2009; Tomlinson, 2007) that includes issues such as global citizenship, ethics and culture.

With these trends in mind, many HEIs have noted that, in addition to offering the option of the well-established dissertation, there is a necessity and indeed opportunity to offer some equivalent alternatives. This includes a variety of suitable projects with external organisations that can address a specific issue or area of interest or concern to that organisation. Projects, research studies and investigations such as these are used in

many disciplines at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels. The credit value may vary, it can be for individuals or groups, it may be mandatory or there may be a choice available to do a dissertation as an alternative, and there may be a presentation or reflective report required. It is worth noting that similar variations also exist across the sector in the requirements for dissertations. Such final assessment studies formed part of a National Teaching Fellowship report (Brown et al, 2012) where the focus was on identifying assessments that lead to enhanced student learning experiences, and the findings were that an increasing number of programme teams were seeking to replace the extended text approach, such as the dissertation, with a major project, a series of smaller tasks or by the evaluation of a wider range of skills and competencies.

Institutional case study

The premise for this research report is that outward-facing initiatives, such as projects with external partners, support the development of employability attributes, particularly the abilities for innovation, creativity, collaboration and managing risk. Additionally, it is not only private-sector businesses that can benefit, but also the public sector and third-sector entities. Prior research (O'Leary, 2012 and 2013) indicates that the benefits of providing such employability-related support can be captured by the 3C's of Content (accumulation of relevant knowledge and information networks), Capability (direct application in a relevant employer context) and Character (working alone and in teams), and that such indicators can be used in an Employability Strategy Model to identify areas of strength and for further development, the model acting as an aid to decision-making and discussion rather than determining definitive outcomes and solutions. In the longer term, this case-controlled study also offers the opportunity for a quantifiable longitudinal study.

At Regent's University London (RUL), the Masters in Luxury Brand Management (MALBM) programme is a specialist postgraduate programme taken over three semesters, the first two on taught modules and the final semester devoted to a dissertation or project. This provides an opportunity for a direct comparison between the two options in terms of their values in enhancing the student experience generally as

well as on the development of attributes such as employability. The principal research questions being addressed are:

1. Is a choice of final assessments attractive to students?
2. Do client-related initiatives help enhance student attributes?
3. What challenges exist in offering such an option?

The programme itself was validated in 2010 with the option of Dissertation or Project as the final 60-credits in the 180-credits programme. Passing the Research Methods module is a pre-requisite for both the Dissertation and Project, the main differences lying in the objectives and outputs of each. The Dissertation requires an individual 15,000 word report on a relevant topic of interest to the student, a format widely used with some variations across the sector. The Project, often individual but which has also been tackled by a small team of students when required, requires three outputs; a report of 10,000 words, a reflection of 1,000 words and a presentation of 30 minutes. The use of team projects in higher education is itself a topic of much debate but recent literature (Whatley & Nerantzi, 2016) highlights its growing acceptance and benefit for enhancing graduate attributes internationally.

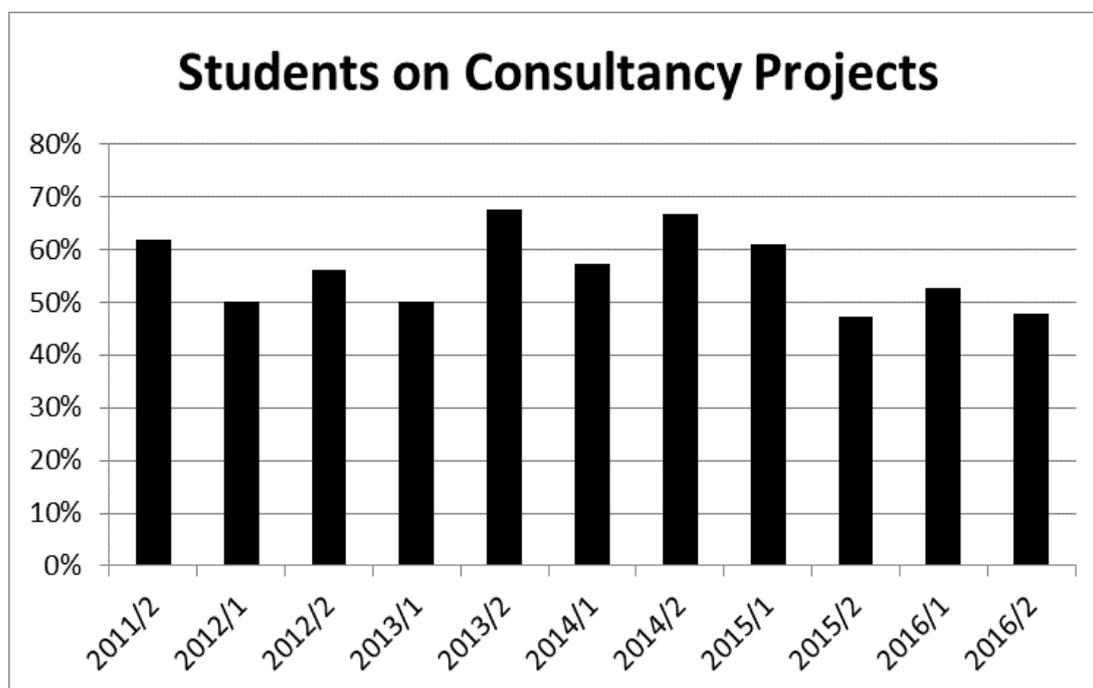
Sourcing projects has been managed by the Programme Director, Module Leader and selected lecturers from the programme team using personal industry contacts. Some clients provide repeat projects periodically but it is necessary to continually develop and maintain this network of contacts. Students have also progressively sourced a rising number of projects themselves and indeed, while such projects need to be vetted to ensure that the work is suitable, students now initiate over half of the projects. One key difference worth noting between the project option and the dissertation concerns relationship management. In a dissertation, there are primarily two people involved; one student and one supervisor. However, with an external partner involved, a project involves at least three people and maybe more if a small team of students is tackling it. Therefore, there can be multiple interactions to manage in a project compared to a dissertation. The MALBM programme at RUL is still a young programme but, with over three hundred students having passed through it, an analysis of the choices made is appropriate, as illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Analysis of MALBM Dissertation and Consultancy Projects 2011 to 2016.

Year	Student numbers				
	Dissertations		Consultancies		Total
2011	8	38%	13	62%	21
2012	20	47%	23	53%	43
2013	25	39%	39	61%	64
2014	26	36%	46	64%	72
2015	27	48%	29	52%	56
2016	32	51%	31	49%	63
Totals	138	43%	181	57%	319

Note: normally two cohorts per year but only one in 2011.

Figure 1. Analysis of MALBM Dissertation and Consultancy Projects 2011 to 2016.



Note: normally two cohorts per year but only one in 2011.

So far, the project option is proving more popular than the traditional dissertation, with 57% taking it up. The programme has two cohorts of starters per year and the balance of choices has varied across these first eleven cohorts but in only two of eleven cohorts have less than half of the students chosen the project option. There have been 104 different projects, giving an average team size of 1.7 students per team. However, it is worth noting that, while the initial approach was to tackle larger projects using small teams, the trend over these early years has been to break these up into discrete

individual projects where possible. The reflections of the students on their experiences of working on one of these projects have been revealing in that they often comment on employability-related issues as a key reason for choosing the project option, as outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Comments from project reflections.



Enhanced self-confidence is regularly noted by the students and many comment on working in teams and learning from others, reflecting previous research on the development of personal qualities (Maher, 2010) and transferable traits (Bolles, 2014), as well as in enhancing both soft and hard-skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

In addition to the reflections of the students, it is important to consider the reactions and thoughts of the client organisations. In Figure 3, a synopsis of such outcomes is provided, and the clients indicate their satisfaction with the students and their work in several different ways. As illustrated, satisfaction is represented in direct feedback, often received at the time of the student presentation, in requests for repeat projects and in offers to the students ranging from internships, to short-term projects, to full-time appointments.

Figure 3. Client reflections on the students and work undertaken

Feedback during the student presentation or in email:

- "excellent job on their report ... happy to meet new students ..."
- "really appreciate the effort the students made ..."
- "great pleasure to collaborate ..."
- "more than happy to continue our relationship ..."
- "like to speak to students interested in projects or internships ..."

Repeat project statistics:

It is worth noting that, over the initial cohorts, around 40-50% of the projects were with the same clients but on different topics. In other words, close to half of clients maintain links for more collaboration, a good indication of their satisfaction. Also, several clients have subsequently taken up guest lecturer roles on the programme and see it as a potential source of support, internships and potentially employees.

Employment-related outcomes:

Alumni feedback indicates that several are now working in the sector with their client, while others have found it to be a key differentiator for them in their interviews with other potential employers.

It may be that the consultancy project offers a form of extended interview, of benefit to both the client and the student as they explore what they can offer each other in terms of compatibility and opportunity. Clearly, the longer-term impact will take some time to establish but these initial indications are positive and suggest benefits for all of the stakeholders involved; the students and the employers, as well as the higher education institution itself.

Conclusions

This research explores how the development of HE students' employability-related attributes can be incorporated into the final assessments of degree programmes using client projects, many of which are with small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) as well as with the larger household names, as an alternative to the well-established dissertation. The study aimed to discover if a choice of final assessments is attractive to students, if client-related initiatives help enhance student attributes, and to identify the challenges that exist in offering such an option.

After over five years of running the programme, it is clear that the project option is popular with students and over half, 57%, have chosen it. Nevertheless, the dissertation is still popular with just under half, 43%, choosing it. Therefore, it is perhaps having the option that is more important than having either on its own.

The findings also provide evidence of enhancements to student employability and confirm the views of others (Herrmann et al, 2008) that such initiatives have a potentially broader benefit across society as such enhanced graduate attributes can be valuable in the private sector, the public-sector, and in charities, social enterprises and other third-sector groups. Such arrangements also offer employers the chance to assess potential recruits, as well as to tackle ongoing issues within their organisation. The students' comments suggest clear benefits in supporting such collaborations between HEIs and external organisations are so reinforce the findings of several major reviews on the topic (Barnett, 2014; Kettle, 2013; Mourshed et al, 2012; Wilson, 2012; Young, 2014) as well as some more specific studies (Donleavy, 2012; Driffield et al, 2011; Rae, 2010; Reddy & Moores, 2006).

Such initiatives do however also present several challenges to the HEI, including their integration into the curriculum, considerations of support through both academics and professionals, finding suitable projects, issues around working in teams, and the output in terms of reports and presentations.

There is a general trend across the HE sector to find equivalent alternatives to the traditional final dissertation and this experience, with projects as an alternative to

dissertations, has been positive for students, staff and clients. Adopting such an approach could help enhance both the student experience and the institution's focus on employability, key elements in many HEI rankings. This approach has now been adopted by other postgraduate programmes at the university and is also being considered for undergraduate level. For other HEIs considering such initiatives, it is also worth noting the challenges as well as the benefits, particularly those related to finding clients, managing the processes and supervision.

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