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An enquiry-based and self-developmental approach to employability at the University of Birmingham

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The University of Birmingham views as a fundamental element of its Learning and Teaching Strategy a commitment that students acquire the skills and attributes viewed as essential by the graduate employment sector. These skills and attributes may be developed at the University through participation in academic study and extra-curricular activities. Central to the learning culture of the University is a model of enquiry-based learning (EBL). This approach views students as active participants in the learning process, encouraging them to develop a pattern of self-reflection that will continue beyond the learning environment (University of Birmingham Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2007, p. 2).

The link between EBL and graduate employability is also clearly made through initiatives that aim to support the integration of employability skills and attributes in the various aspects of University life both within and alongside the curriculum. The University of Birmingham's Employability Strategy proposes an enquiry-based approach to employability, and supports the argument that enquiry-based learning is the foundation for reflective practice and professional development.

As we work with graduate employers regionally, nationally and internationally, it has become clear that they are looking to higher education to provide graduates who can evidence employability skills and attributes: a good 2:1 degree is no longer enough to secure a graduate position. In response to this, the Higher Education Academy has published Student Employability Profiles that map key employability skills and attributes to subject areas and provides guidance on how to integrate them into the curriculum (Rees, Forbes & Keble, 2006). The University is currently

undertaking an audit to assess how employability skills are embedded within the core curriculum. The Careers and Employability Centre (CEC) is working with academics and others to integrate reflective practice, employability skills and career development learning into the core curriculum (Yorke & Knight, 2006).

This paper will examine six initiatives at the University of Birmingham that seek to enable students to make a tangible link between EBL and employability. The Careers and Employability Centre seeks to work both within and alongside the curriculum to support and resource students to develop employability skills using an enquiry-based and self-reflective model.

Progress

The process of personal development planning (PDP) is recognised in higher education as the process that "helps learners to understand the value added through learning that is above and beyond the attainment of the subject they have studied" (QAA, 2009, p. 6).

'Progress' is an interactive tool that has been developed to enable students to identify, reflect on and develop skills and attributes gained through both academic study and extracurricular activities. Students engage with Progress at different levels. A skills audit enables them to assess their skills and attributes, and to track their development in relation to an academic or extracurricular activity. Links to a range of interactive resources to support their development are provided. Progress also provides the capacity for students to reflect on their experience and use this information in discussion with personal and academic tutors and CEC staff in a job application process (University of Birmingham, 2010a).

The Personal Skills Award (PSA)

The Personal Skills Award (PSA) is an initiative that actively supports the process of learning through self-directed enquiry and reflection on practice. The PSA recognises student development and activity through both accredited employability modules and a certificated activities pathway. The core module of the PSA requires students to use a reflective cycle to assess the development of skills in relation to an academic or extracurricular activity. Three reflective models are examined in depth, and students are required to use one or more of them to reflect on their experience. This approach enables the students to choose the theory that suits both their learning style and the activity. Many students find Kolb's analysis of learning styles helpful in understanding and assessing their preferred learning style (Kolb, 1984). Some students who have participated in a group project have found Freire's model of action participation helpful (Freire, 1972). Others found the work of Argyris and Schon valuable when analysing how 'espoused theory' learned through academic study relates to 'theory in use' learned through practical application in a work context (Argyris & Schon, 1974). The aim of the module is to encourage students to establish a pattern of reflective practice which can be carried through from their academic study to their graduate career, thus connecting EBL to professional practice (University of Birmingham, 2010b). As higher education moves towards recording student achievement in the Higher Education Achievement Record (Burgess, 2007), the PSA will be an integral part of how we represent student achievement at the University.

The Honey Pot Award

The Honey Pot Award was established in 2005 (Honey Pot Award, 2005) as an initiative to provide financial support to undergraduate students to enable them to undertake work experience over the summer vacation. The selection process mirrors the selection process for a graduate job, involving completion of an application form, an interview and a presentation. Students are also required to reflect on and articulate their experience in relation to the skills they have developed as a result of their participation and to identify their skill gaps. The Honey Pot Award has been designed to promote the concept of personal development and reflection on practice in the context of work experience, as a natural development of enquiry-based learning (McGill & Beaty, 1999).

Adept Programme for Doctoral Researchers

Adept is an innovative career development and employability service for doctoral researchers at the University of Birmingham. The programme uses the doctoral researchers to design and deliver the service to their peers, resulting in skills development alongside work experience in the context of doctoral research. It has been designed to equip the participants for the tasks and roles they will take on in their future research, academic or business careers. This is an example of the enquiry-based approach to employability for doctoral researchers, provided by CEC.

Student Placements in Entrepreneurship Education Programme (SPEED)

The Entrepreneurship and Innovation Centre of the University of Birmingham has been an active participant in SPEED since its conception in 2006. SPEED is rooted in the principles of EBL, but takes the principles beyond simply enquiry-based learning into the realms of 'extreme learning'. Students are given the opportunity to set up their own businesses through a learner-owned process that enables them to take responsibility for their own decisions, while receiving guidance and support from the University. The success of the SPEED programme at Birmingham has resulted in the establishment of a considerable number of small business developments by our graduates, as well as the development of other enterprise programmes within the regional economy (Corlett, Munro & Cook, 2009).

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is an initiative enabling students to adjust to university life. PASS is a developmental model of peer support: students are encouraged to develop skills and attributes through participation as PASS leaders or participants. PASS leaders facilitate study sessions around a module, developing a range of skills in the process such as leadership, time management, cross-cultural and interpersonal skills. PASS participants develop skills in teamwork, cross-cultural communication and critical thinking alongside the ability to manage and direct their own learning. PASS clearly supports the model of enquiry-based learning at the University of Birmingham, and also offers an opportunity to develop employability skills that are invaluable for students' graduate careers (Wood & Dawson, 2009).

Conclusion

In this article I have endeavoured to show how the focus on enquiry-based learning at the University of Birmingham has prompted an enquiry-based approach to employability within the institution. Students are encouraged to be active participants in a process that develops employability in the same way as they participate in the process that develops academic learning. The various activities I have described provide students with both the opportunity and a framework for skills development within higher education, which can be adapted and used as a framework for continuing professional development in their graduate careers. At Birmingham we believe that the experience provided to students must incorporate both academic excellence and skills development for a graduate career. If the concept of both learning and employability as an enquiry-based process is to be taken seriously in higher education, then initiatives such as those described here will become an integral part of an employability strategy to produce graduates equipped for the labour market in the 21st century.

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