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The Music Studio Challenge: effective practice in developing enterprise and employability skills while supporting transition

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Rationale

Creative industries attract many people who “start and run diverse kinds of enterprise, from self employed artists to owners of globally significant business organisations” (Bjorkegren, 1996, cited in Rae, 2004, p. 492). The graduate website, Prospects, suggests the creative sector is experiencing a “golden age” (2009); however, for graduates seeking to obtain entry it remains a difficult marketplace. A significant part of the workforce is self-employed and works from home or a small office/studio; part-time and seasonal work is commonplace and hours are frequently unsociable. Competition for graduate level jobs is fierce and many artists find they must support themselves through alternative work. The UK music industry alone is worth £5 billion a year, generating 126,000 full-time jobs (UK Trade & Investment, 2007 as cited by Prospects, 2009); yet the reality of these jobs is that they are for the most part secured by individuals who have successfully developed a network of contacts over time. Creative arts students and graduates struggle to access relevant work experience which provides opportunities to develop employability skills such as creative enterprise and networking. Related work experience and industry contacts are valuable and indeed essential for successful career progression within this sector.

Progression from a partner college to a top-up award at Leeds Met is a key benefit for students across the University’s Regional University Network (RUN). Established links in the area of music have seen increasing numbers of students progressing to Level 6 of BSc (Hons) Music Technology and BSc (Hons) Music Production. Nonetheless, the transition from further education to higher education can be challenging to students who have enjoyed the familiarity of a smaller, more personalised setting; as a result, “their successful progression cannot be taken for granted” (Smith & Bockock, 1999, cited in Knox, 2005, p. 104). As an institution we are aware of the need to support learner transition (Leeds Metropolitan University ALT Strategy 2008-12) and of the significance that “articulation across the FE/HE interface [has] to the widening participation agenda” (Knox, 2005).

The Partnerships & Progression team (RUN) in collaboration with Innovation North saw the Festival of Partnerships (a University-wide festival of activities and events designed to promote the value of the University’s partnerships to students) as an opportunity to develop an activity at the Institute for Enterprise to encourage RUN students’ engagement and smooth their progression. The activity, which

comprised a 24-hour challenge based in the music studios, subsequently served to strengthen FE/HE relations while simultaneously enhancing the RUN student experience in the context of enterprise and employability.

Rae (2007) recommends that “the learning experience which connects enterprise and employability must be relevant to the core degree subject, as well as stimulating and enjoyable”. By devising an attractive activity that engaged learners, the activity evolved to meet a number of agendas: employability and enterprise, curriculum enhancement and widening participation.

The aims of the Music Studio Challenge were to:

- facilitate a learner’s progression from FE to HE
- enhance the Foundation Degree Music curriculum in an innovative and exciting way
- provide students with a ‘live’ learning situation, demanding a creative, entrepreneurial and professional approach
- develop the key enterprise and employability skills of communication, teamwork, networking and time management
- facilitate engagement with industry.

The challenge

The activity consists of a 24-hour Music Studio Challenge where teams compete to produce, perform and record their own version of a well-known pop song. Students work in teams of four supported by a Level 6 mentor from Innovation North. Mentors provide RUN participants with coaching on how to use the studio equipment and support in defining the team’s approach and strategy to the challenge. Moreover, involvement in the activity provides Level 6 Music students with an opportunity to develop key employability skills. Surveys suggest that “employers value skills of leadership and team working, communication and presentation skills” (Rae, 2007).

“The studio challenge is a valuable opportunity for students to develop their performance, teamwork, ability to work under pressure and technical skills.”

(Paul McGlone, Course Leader at Loughborough College)

The enterprise skill of creativity is also developed during the challenge, which gives students the opportunity “to flex their creative muscles and produce some quality material in a very open-minded environment” (Luke Baxter, Leeds City College – Park Lane Campus). The autonomous nature of the activity means teams are required to navigate the challenge, employing skills of negotiation, time management, teamwork, decision-making, creativity, flexibility, spontaneity, problem-solving, commitment and professionalism. The surprise inclusion of an additional ‘half-way task’ requires teams to incorporate a random instrument (e.g. banjo, ukulele or accordion). A recent Design Council report (Abrams, 2006) suggests creativity can give individuals or teams ‘the edge’; the ability to respond to the half-way task requires a creative, flexible and positive approach. This ability can be the differentiating factor between contestants. Engagement from representatives of the music industry increases the real-life sense of the activity. Teams are required to present their final creative collaborations to a panel of three, including two industry experts and an academic member from Innovation North as well as the other competing teams. Feedback is a significant element of the challenge and encourages students to reflect on the process undertaken to achieve the end result.

“Students who have attended commented on how the challenge has helped develop overall musical and professional skills.”

(Steve Reay, Newcastle College)

Connecting employability and enterprise

The challenge offers alternative education through enterprise (Edwards & Muir, 2005), providing space and time for personal and professional development. Rae’s (2004) theory of “social and relational learning gained from interpersonal participation” is relevant given the collaborative approach and the demands on participants to manage team dynamics. Industry engagement places further focus on students’ communication and interpersonal skills. Students commented on the pressure they felt to present their creations to peers and experienced musicians. However, the “friendly environment encourages students to exchange ideas and build on their interpersonal skills” (Steve Reay, Newcastle College). The challenge is concentrated, all-consuming, littered with moments of highs and lows, frustration and satisfaction. Its authenticity promotes intensive learning and fuels creativity. The experience provides a simulated insight into ‘real life’ in the music industry or a similar pressurised creative setting.

In a recent publication, Wareham (2009) notes: “the creative practitioner must have the ability to work in variety of settings”. The activity presents a new setting, a new challenge and an opportunity for students to demonstrate creative flexibility in a fun way. For a tutor at Loughborough College, the challenge “is fun and is seen as a reward by the students, for their hard work”. For the past two years RUN tutors have used the challenge as a tool to motivate students to commit to their Foundation Degrees; it is seen as an “out of the ordinary experience”.

“The challenge itself was incredibly rewarding. Above all though, I had a lot of fun at Headingley Campus. I laughed a lot whilst in and out of the studios. It was definitely time well spent.”

(Luke Baxter, Leeds City College – Park Lane Campus)

Following the challenge students continued to stretch themselves in ‘out of the ordinary’ situations. The winners of the 2008 challenge busked for charity at Headingley Campus and performed at Leeds Met Live in the Students’ Union. Others formed groups and continued to collaborate. Notably, all challenge participants who intended to progress to Level 6 successfully completed their top-up programme, achieving a full Honours degree. The challenge has the capacity to build a strong sense of community; students are able to identify with the institution and the support available. The opportunity to meet staff and familiarise themselves with facilities and future peers can be invaluable; the challenge essentially enables students to “see and experience the big university” (Paul McGlone, Loughborough College).

An increasingly competitive graduate market (Rae, 2007) combined with a music industry that largely operates through established networks of creative individuals who “value fresh thinking” (Knight, 2009; JAMES conference, 2009) requires Music graduates to adopt innovative and enterprising approaches. Creative problem-solving, an ability to network, to present ideas, to spot and seize opportunities are crucial to the success of a Music graduate: “Indeed in many fields the mark of creativity is now understood as the ability not to solve a problem, but to be able to discover one” (Sargeant & Zeserson, 2007).

The benefits of integrating career and enterprise development within an extra-curricular widening participating activity are clear. Such an approach can encourage the application of enterprise behaviours seen as increasingly critical in the world of creative arts (Hegarty & Jones, 2008). Rae (2004) suggests “the cultural and media industry ... is of growing

social significance". The need to co-ordinate activities promoting creative, enterprising attributes is therefore significant on an individual and collective scale, for as Wareham (2009) states, "a critical point about the future careers of our students is that they will be the people who are likely to lead and innovate within the creative industries of the future rather than simply reproducing them."

There is potential to develop and integrate the activity formally into the Foundation Degree Music awards, enabling increased opportunities for reflection before and after the activity. Furthermore, the model could easily be adapted to alternative subject areas; the RUN team has already considered activities in the areas of Hospitality and Sport. Given the increasing need to engage employers in innovative practices, it would seem fruitful to explore how to develop and expand such opportunities.

The Music Studio Challenge represents a successful and supportive model that engages students in an exciting, authentic and relevant way, supporting progression from FE to HE and developing valuable employability skills and entrepreneurial behaviours.

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