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Building Employability into Programme Design: Industry, Academic, and Student Collaboration on Programme Design

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Abstract: Research (CBI & Pearson, 2018) shows that many employers are worried about the skills and work-readiness of graduates, and HEIs have an increasingly large responsibility to ensure they produce employable graduates through the design of their courses (Bates et al., 2018). At a small, private HEI in London, we wanted to create a new undergraduate Business Management degree that embodied the principles of work-integrated learning throughout the programme. The aim of the programme is to produce employable graduates with a lifelong learning mindset driven by moral courage. This case study reviews our approach to programme design, evaluating the impact that collaboration between industry partners, academics, and students/alumni had on design. We draw on questionnaire and interview data from participants in the design process to provide a model other course designers may want to consider if they are looking to embed industry engagement, employability, and work-integrated learning into their degree programmes.

Paper: Research (CBI & Pearson, 2018) shows that many employers are worried about the skills and work-readiness of graduates and higher education institutions (HEIs) have an increasingly large responsibility to ensure they produce employable graduates (Bates et al., 2018). At Pearson College London, a boutique HEI in London, we wanted to build the employability of our graduates through the creation of a new undergraduate Business Management degree that embodied the principles of work-integrated learning (WIL) throughout the programme. The aim of our programme is to produce employable graduates with a lifelong learning mindset driven by moral courage. The case study we present in this paper reviews our approach to programme design, evaluating the impact that partnership and collaboration between employers, academics, and students/alumni had on design. We draw on questionnaire and interview data from participants in the design process to provide a model other course designers may want to consider if they are looking to embed industry engagement, employability, and WIL into their degree programmes.

There is limited research on the design of WIL programmes. Yet WIL is an increasingly common method of improving employability of graduates (Bates et al., 2018) and there has long been an expectation in the UK by regulators that employability and the building of skills and qualities

necessary for employment be part of programme learning outcomes and thus programme design (Knight & Yorke, 2002). Wider research (Pegg et al., 2012) not specific to WIL suggests that collaboration between employers and academic teams designing content can build skills in students and develop their employability. Some HEIs, therefore, consult employers in designing selected courses (Scott et. al., 2019). There is also evidence (Hess, 2007) to show that involving students as stakeholders in course design produces positive outcomes for the students in terms of their motivation and experience. Building on this research, we aim to understand what the impact of this collaboration, particularly in the context of WIL, might be.

We captured our innovative course design approach by asking participants for their reflections on the process of creating this new degree. Our questionnaire asked participants to reflect on their experiences of taking part in our Degree Concept Team (DCT) meetings, which brought together all the stakeholders in the project – internal and external academics, current students and alumni, and industry representatives from a range of organisations and industries. We then conducted in-depth interviews with members of our degree validation panels to understand how they felt the collaborative design process had impacted the programme submitted. This paper will report on this data, which is part one of our research project. The next stage of the project will be to gather data once the programme has run to understand the effectiveness of our design process from the perspectives of tutors and students once on the programme.

HEIs in the UK have been rethinking the role of career, academic, and support services, to ensure employability skills are prominent in the programmes they deliver (Tang, 2019) and this paper will offer insight to anyone looking to design a programme that emphasises the links between industry and academia and wants to embed employability into the core of their degree. As a programme aiming to create work-ready graduates who had built a portfolio of professional experiences across their degree, we needed to balance the employability needs of students, with the need for academic excellence. By bringing employers into conversation with academics and students during the design process, we found all parties benefited and left the process feeling empowered and energised.

Mindful that the efficacy of WIL activities is diminished where they are not purposefully integrated with curricula (Clark, 2018), this case study will explore how we integrated WIL and co-construction of the programme between academics, employers, and students. We provide a framework for other practitioners and will outline our plans for evaluating the impact of this on students when they begin the programme. It will also demonstrate that building employability into the heart of Business programmes, particularly using work-integrated learning, provides a chance to produce highly employable graduates. This paper will also add value to practitioners looking to review existing programmes or develop new programmes that include the voices of students, academics, and employers in a meaningful way.

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