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Getting Noticed: Enhancing Employability of Postgraduate Students

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Abstract: Graduate employability is a key performance indicator for UK based Higher Education institutions (HE). Various employability initiatives are constantly being developed by HE institutions as well as individual programme teams. For students graduating in 2020, the employment climate had never seemed more uncertain and challenging. All traditional ways in which employability skills are developed and enhanced, including work placements, were no longer an option for a vast majority of students due to the global pandemic. As a way to ensure that a cohort of postgraduate students from 2020 get an opportunity to showcase their skills to potential employers, an online-based project was launched – ViewPoints. This paper outlines the project and provides insights from students on their perception of how this project has aided them in enhancing their employability.

Paper: Context

Employability is defined as a graduate's potential to obtain and function in a job role (Yorke, 2004). Graduate employability is often viewed as a key aspect of Higher Education (HE). Improving employability skills in students assists HE institutions achieve student success with regards to their future careers (Pouratashi, 2019). From the perspective of students, employability is a key priority and a main reason for engaging in higher education (Sin & Neave, 2016). As well as technical and discipline specific knowledge, soft or transversal skills are seen as essential aspects of employability (MacLachlan, 2019). In addition to embedding employability skills in the curriculum, co-curricular activities and experiential learning in particular are effective ways of developing these skills (Wagner & du Toit, 2020). One of the challenging aspects for a graduate is to demonstrate to potential employers that they have acquired and are competent with regards to transversal skills. In a very competitive employment market, those who are effective in communicating and demonstrating these transversal skills are often those who not only secure job roles but are also able to effectively progress in their career. Work placements and internships are common ways in which graduates can both showcase and demonstrate transversal skills.

For almost all students who were entering their summer term of studies in 2020, the future had never been so uncertain. All plans for placements, internships and jobs came crashing down. Whilst

some businesses pivoted rapidly and enabled remote placements and jobs, most were not equipped to do this. Discussions with a cohort of postgraduate marketing students in the Faculty of Business made it clear that students' offers of placements and internships were either withdrawn or that companies were not able to take on placement students. Most students, rightly, felt that in such a catastrophic time this was one more strike against their future career plans. They were very concerned about how they can stand out in the employment market which is only likely to be even more challenging as the world navigated its way through the pandemic. As a response to these concerns from students, ViewPoints was launched in May 2020.

ViewPoints is a LinkedIn based blog forum where students of the MA Marketing Suite of programmes share their thoughts and learning with the professional community. The aim of the project was to enable students to showcase their skills to potential employers and develop a professional network. Students have opportunities to get involved with ViewPoints in the roles of project management, content creation, and leads of special interest series.

LinkedIn was chosen as the primary platform for its professional and career networking opportunities. Sister platforms of Instagram and TikTok are now being used by the project in response to evolving opportunities provided by these platforms in relation to employability.

Methodology and Findings

Using a qualitative research methodology, 6 students involved in the project through various roles were interviewed to understand how they perceived this project in terms of enhancing employability. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that students felt that the project helped them:

- Develop skills to manage conflicts within and between teams
- Gain a better understanding of managing social media accounts including using data to make decisions
- Improve their writing skills
- Build networks with potential employers

Limitations and Future Directions

ViewPoints has only been in existence since May 2020 and the project is still evolving. As the project grows over the coming years, more student and graduate feedback will help gain a better understanding of the longer-term impacts of the project. In addition, feedback from employers would help identify how ViewPoints should be improved to maximise impact.

At present, only a small number of motivated students engage with ViewPoints and ways to encourage more students to get involved is needed. One of the ways this could be done is to find ways to embed engagement with ViewPoints in student assessment regimes. More involvement from the alumni community with ViewPoints will also enhance networking opportunities for students as well as increasing the visibility of students to a wider group of potential employers.

Conclusions

In the relatively short time since its launch, ViewPoints has grown in strength and popularity. It has provided students with great opportunities to develop transversal skills whilst at the same time showcasing their skills to potential employers. As the world starts to enter the next phase of the new normal, it would be interesting to see how this project evolves and continues to provide students with further opportunities with regards to employability.

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