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Experiential learning in the pandemic: lessons learned from alternative placements in Education

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Abstract: Graduate employability continues to direct the higher education agenda (Tomlinson, 2017); however, the covid-19 pandemic forced many to rethink how students gained experiential learning when access to formal and informal education settings was limited. This paper reflects on the experience of working with community partners in the arts and cultural sector in Nottingham to create a bespoke six-week placement ‘challenge’ for thirty-five second-year students. Preliminary outcomes indicated that although students were disappointed that covid kept them from participating in a traditional placement, they were drawn to the bespoke challenges due to their involvement with the arts sector. Participation did not necessarily alter their employment aspirations, but it did ‘open their eyes’ to additional educational employment opportunities. Education departments, therefore, should think about growing the offer to include the arts sector in experiential learning to expand student experiences and prevent the transactional expectations of education and employment.

Paper: Graduate employability and the debates surrounding graduates’ ‘work-readiness’ continues to direct the higher education agenda (Tomlinson, 2017). Cole and Willox (2021) argue, the UK is not alone with the government using employment data and metrics—such as university graduates securing ‘graduate employment’—as evaluation tools measuring whether the university is providing ‘value’, or a student is successful. This evaluation can lead to divisive funding schemes or the requirement to embed employability in modules across a course. Additionally, these metrics reinforce discourses of neoliberalism and the transactional nature of higher education and employment.

Terms such as employability, high impact practices (HIPs), practice-based learning (PBLs), professional placement, and experiential learning all denote slightly different activities, however, the intension remains the same— integrating practice to generate personal and professional growth. In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic turned higher education on its head leaving universities to make crucial decisions regarding educational delivery (Gonzalez et al., 2020). By May 2020, UK universities were facing a 2.5-billion-pound deficit (Friend, 2020), and it was acknowledged that the effects of Covid-19 would be felt across the HE sector for years to come. Universities were forced to adapt and make difficult choices suspect all face-to-face teaching and limit social contact for all university staff and students (Gonzalez et al., 2020). While at the beginning of the pandemic, academics and university administration were in emergency-mode, emphasis shifted to endurance and capturing

good virtual practices. It could be argued that all effort was placed on the delivery of teaching and little guidance was provided for employability and courses with embedded professional placement. Thus, individual courses had to manage student expectations, fulfil course offers, and in many cases create bespoke placement experiences in just weeks.

This paper will reflect on the experiences of creating a bespoke placement opportunity for thirty-five second-year Education students, with five academic tutors supervising the experiential learning, and three community partners who set the challenges. Traditionally, second-year students take part in six-week placements in primary schools or other community settings. Due to the pandemic, Education offered students an alternative placement opportunity mirroring the work of ChalleNGe—a Culture Education Partnership in Nottingham. ChalleNGe is a city-wide partnership connecting heritage and arts professionals, teachers, practitioners and young people to ensure children and young people living in Nottingham can engage in arts and culture. The aim: for community partners to set a ‘challenge’ for university students to explore and answer. Using experiential learning theory (ELT) and particularly the work of Kolb, students were asked to reflect on their bespoke challenge journey. Additionally, all students presented their solutions or findings as a team to their community partner. Interestingly, the community partners placed no limits on the solutions students could produce to nurture the most imaginative and innovative ideas.

Preliminary outcomes indicated that although students were disappointed that covid kept them from partaking in a traditional placement, they were drawn to the bespoke challenges due to their involvement with the arts sector (Students 2, 3, 4 & 5). Involvement did not necessarily alter their employment aspirations, however, it did ‘open their eyes’ to additional educational employment opportunities (Student 4). Academic staff found supervising the challenges to be a ‘very positive’ experience, indicating that ‘through this partnership new opportunities have ar[isen]’ (Academic 1). The community partners revealed that the advantages were not just experienced by the students, but that the collaboration ‘allow[ed] us to maintain our close relationship with NTU and student populations’ (Partner, 1).

As universities continue to be evaluated on graduate employment outcomes, the question facing both staff and students is whether students have the scope for exploratory experiential learning before they (and their universities) are judged on their employment outcomes post-graduation. For students to gain the most from their experiences, universities must ensure the experience is integrated into the course—with ample supervision and time for students to reflect—versus being an ‘add-on’ experience (O’Neill, 2017). Yet, the assumption that experiential learning is only for students seemed to be false in this instance as all participants felt they increased their knowledge in some way. Therefore, Education departments should think about growing the offer to include the arts sector in educational experiential learning if only to expand the experiences of our students and prevent the transactional expectations of education and employment.

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