

Understanding university students' involvement with business consultancy: an audit and review of barriers and motivations

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Enterprise is becoming a more important part of UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) activity as a source of revenue, added value to students, and broader demonstration of the contribution of HEIs to the economy.

This is being driven firstly by *political and economic exigencies*, such as successive government agendas seeking to better align the HE sector with business community requirements, and the increasing marketisation of HE, which brings pressures to:

- ◆ establish revenue streams in addition to teaching and scholarly research
- ◆ demonstrate enhanced 'employability' of graduates
- ◆ differentiate course offerings through 'added value' for students

There are also *pedagogic exigencies* as demonstrated in the shift of emphasis in the way in which people are thinking about the HE experience and the role of employability within it (see Pegg et al., 2012). For example:

- ◆ the development of explicit connections between study and the workplace
- ◆ the issue of student autonomy and the shared contribution to the student experience of higher education
- ◆ the current lack of evaluation of initiatives and approaches to teaching and learning employability skills

University business services and enterprise activity will therefore be under greater scrutiny than before. Despite this there is little information on the overall provision of business services by HEIs in the UK and even less on that which involves students engaging with consultancy (see Rae et al [2012] for a recent exception). In this paper, our focus is on the latter: the role of *students* in university business consultancy within the disciplines of marketing, media and creative industries. We present the findings of a major new report (Authors, 2014) that investigates how UK university students are engaging in HEI knowledge exchange through consultancy, what different models of student consultancy exist and assesses the key tensions, barriers and motivations (both internal and external) in integrating students in consultancy in ways that benefit them, academic staff, HEIs and external organisations.

The findings in this paper are based on two methodologies: an audit (desk research and survey) of business services involving students at all 164 UK HEI's and more detailed case studies of four universities utilising 32 interviews and three focus groups.

Whilst we briefly document what internship, placement and other student services HEIs offer, our main attention is on Student Enterprise Units (SEUs)¹.where 46 UK HEIs have business consultancy services that utilize students. We find that:

- In the main, SEU's are reasonably small, have a modest number of staff dedicated to them, and are not currently a significant source of income for UK HEIs. However, there is an acceptance that this type of enterprise activity is not about profit for the HEI, but its value lies in enhancing the student experience.
- What does seem consistent though – particularly amongst the more successful setups – is the need for dedicated staff to develop business contacts and to work with tutors and students.
- Projects vary in scope, but it seems clear that larger SEUs (and therefore those that have the most impact on HEIs, their students, and external organisations) are likely to be centrally run rather than located in schools.
- Over 60% of Student Enterprise Units pay students in some way, though in most cases there was no guarantee of student payment, no set prices offered to clients, and so arrangements were generally much more ad hoc than our figure suggests.

We find different models of SEU exist with respect to their links to research and education. By far the most significant role for Student Enterprise Units is to support teaching by providing live briefs and assessed projects to students. This speaks to a model of student enterprise activity that is closely tied to the curriculum, typically a dissertation or final year project that is completed as a piece of consultancy. Where the activity is limited to student assessment, academic may staff have very little input to the project itself and may not have any contact with business clients. Moreover, because activity is aligned with assessment, there are often significant timing issues and limitations on the projects that students can take on. The wider point here is that enterprise that is focussed on student needs is potentially less useful for businesses.

Another model of student enterprise involves greater collaboration between staff and students, which often takes it away from assessed work. These SEU's are more likely to be positioned and branded as a stand-alone agency, and may undertake business-critical work for clients who will pay based on a set fees structure. This model often successfully integrates knowledge exchange, research and education. However, this model is a minority venture: only eight (14.5%) SEU's were based around staff research and seven (12.7%) of 55 SEU's involve collaboration between staff and students. Furthermore, acting as an external –facing commercial consultancy brings many challenges in terms of staff and student capacity, confidence the generation of appropriate business.

In the final part of the presentation we reflect on the findings in the context of ongoing debates around institutional strategies towards enterprise activities, and the place of enterprise within the curriculum.

¹ These are loosely defined as services to business offered by universities that involve current, campus-based students in some formal way. They are about *working with businesses* to solve their problems or to add value as an external consultant rather than sending students out to business for work experience (like with formal placements), although there is some overlap.

References

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