

Creating graduate identities: the professional pathway to the stars (0342)

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INTRODUCTION

Educators today are tasked with developing lifelong learners who can survive and thrive in a global knowledge economy – learners who have the capability to effectively and creatively apply skills and competencies to new situations in an ever-changing, complex world. The employability of our graduates has been a concern across the sector, and a subject of much debate, for a number of years. A primary function of the higher education sector is to increase access to higher level skills and prepare learners for the world of work. To positively fulfil this purpose; adjustments within the curricula provided will always be required. As JISC (2012) suggest, in order to effectively meet the needs of learners, institutions now need to collaborate more with employers to align curriculum design in higher education programmes with the requirements of employers and the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The turbulent economic environment of the last few years has presented a number of implications for the UK higher education sector, educators and graduates alike. The resulting highly competitive job market has coerced higher education institutions into reviewing current practices implemented within their curricula.

The requirement to endlessly improve the design quality of the curriculum and the student learning experience in UK higher education is a longstanding issue that is amidst ever increasing scrutiny given its direct contribution and significance to student development, graduate employment and student satisfaction levels conveyed through the National Student Survey results. Questions relating to learning design also go straight to the heart of current major debates about quality and efficiency in higher education and learning. It is a theme recognised by many influential educational authors including Biggs (2006), Ramsden (1992) and Laurillard (2002) as well as successive UK governments who all identified that an engaging student experience in higher education is a major priority in ensuring the continued competitiveness of UK education in the 21st century.

With wide recognition that employers are now seeking individuals with a range of attributes besides academic ability and subject specialism, such as communication skills, team working, interpersonal skills, problem solving, flexibility, digital literacy and, above all an ability to evidence practical skills. Graduates need to be commercially aware, creative, entrepreneurial and numerate. It has been recognised by amongst others; Bladen & Kennell (2014), Holmes (2013) and Kuit & Fell (2010), that to achieve this desired vision professional bodies and corporate organisations have a role to play in embedding standards of ethics and professional practice in the curricula, with a large proportion of employers stipulating that more graduates should undertake professional qualifications alongside their degree since these provide the evidence of practical skills that employers require.

This research hopes to draw upon these pertinent issues and the work of (Holmes, 2013) who makes the distinction between three types of graduate employability: 'posessional', 'positional' and 'processual'. Holmes' 'positional' approach to employability represents the idea that "... individuals

can make a difference to the likelihood of gaining desired employment by *what they do*, the actions they take” (Holmes, 2013, p.548). This research actively aligns to this field of discourse in the literature by presenting a case study of such an example where a professional pathway has been embedded within the curricula to better reflect the demands of the business sector, and the requirements of graduates. The educational partnership has successfully combined experiential learning and a professional certification stream, with workplace opportunities, giving students a unique opportunity for exposure to live industry projects, and client case studies.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to:

- Explore student insights of the experiential learning journey employed within the curricula, through a professional pathway.
- To examine the value perceptions and experiences of those students who have engaged with the professional pathway and successfully achieved all three levels of professional certification.

This research is important because it offers an insight into the benefits such learning pathways can exhibit to students from management disciplines.

METHODS EMPLOYED

A mixed-method research approach was employed in an attempt to obtain a valid and reliable data set for analysis. The study firstly gathered information from quantitative measures, through the use of questionnaires, in order to gain insights into student perceptions of the professional pathway. The study population was limited to those students who had engaged with the professional pathway and met the eligibility criteria required for participation. The eligibility criteria was that students were required to have successfully achieved all three levels of professional certification namely; professional, expert, specialist.

The design of the questionnaires was based on a likert scale, where questions were posed from an array of perspectives to gain a holistic view of the student experience. Results deducted from the 88 student questionnaire results were subsequently categorised into emergent themes, which were then utilised to inform the focus groups conducted with an independent facilitator. It was considered that the qualitative analysis gained from focus groups would usefully supplement, enrich and extend the perspectives, results and outcomes gained from the questionnaires.

RESULTS

Preliminary results indicate that significant value is attached to such experiential learning experiences in helping institutions to develop graduates who are business ready and desirable to employers, as well as positively enriching the student learning experience.

- *97% of respondents agreed* that the professional pathway and certification scheme offered them valuable industry experience and supported their search for employment upon completion of their studies.
- *85% of respondents* enjoyed the unique and practical nature that the professional pathway offered within their course curricula.

- 92% of respondents agreed that the certification scheme gave them comprehensive knowledge of the Eventsforce platform that could then be used in practical industry situations.

CONCLUSION

This research was undertaken to determine the perceived benefits of the professional learning pathway implemented on the BA Event Management course at Coventry University.

The results of this study indicate that students attribute significant value to the professional certification scheme and recognise its benefits to both enhancing their direct industry experiences and their subsequent employment opportunities upon its completion. The research has also shown that embedded the professional pathway enriches the student experience through its practical application within the curricula. These findings enhance our understanding of curriculum development in the 21st century, providing potential opportunities to expand curriculum construction to encompass professional qualifications that are valued greatly by students and are aligned to employers requirements of event management graduates.

Further work and research needs to be completed to establish whether the views of the students are shared by the relevant professional body and employers in the industry itself.

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