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The role of experiential learning and reflection in transition from student to graduate worker



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Abstract

A final year undergraduate marketing module at Lancaster University, MKTG310: Marketing Research and Consultancy Project, provides students with the opportunity to work on a client project using experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) to gain valuable work experience. However, the experience alone was insufficient as students did not fully recognise the value of the project and were often unable to articulate their experiences to future employers. MKTG310 was redesigned to embed employability skills and reflection. The assessment required students to reflect on their experiences using the CareerEDGE Questionnaire (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), build self-confidence and ensure they could articulate their learning experiences. The paper concludes reflection should be an integral part of any university employability initiative.

Keywords

Employability, experiential learning, reflection

Introduction

Despite concerns about the metrics used to measure graduate employability and criticisms of the underlying assumptions about the purpose of Higher Education (HE), universities are increasingly prioritising student employability. Key drivers to improve graduate employability include: the need to demonstrate return on investment of a university degree; the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) where Graduate Employability is a key criteria for assessing teaching excellence; and feedback from employers stating students lack essential skills.

The Marketing Department at Lancaster University offers MKTG310: Marketing Research and Consultancy Project, an 'experiential learning' capstone module for 65-100 final year students in which they undertake consultancy for a client for 6 months in which students are 'learning by doing' (Roberts, 2012 p.4). This module consists of lectures, workshops and weekly tutor meetings and provides students with the opportunity to put theory into practice whilst gaining

valuable marketing-related work experience. This module was originally assessed by an individual essay and groupwork relating to client outputs including research proposal, client report and presentation. Anecdotal evidence and comments on module evaluations suggested this module provided students with valuable work experience. However, informal discussions with students revealed they were not fully recognising the true value of their experiences and were often unable to articulate their experiences to future employers. The department has a careers programme, but many students do not engage as it is not credit-bearing. Therefore, the academic essay was replaced with an employability portfolio including CV, covering letter, initial student reflections on employability skills and reflections after completion. This paper analyses the impact of introducing this new reflective assessment method on student learning.

Connection to Literature

The expansion of HE in the UK and its associated marketisation ([Blackmore et al., 2016](#)) has led to the belief graduate employability is what students are paying for ([Jameson et al., 2012](#)). The idea HE is responsible for developing graduate employability is contentious but reinforced by the introduction of the TEF where graduate employability is a key institutional metric used to assess teaching quality. Graduate employability has been extensively researched ([Knight and Yorke, 2003a](#), [Yorke and Knight, 2006](#)), and yet is difficult to define as it has different meanings depending on the context ([Cranmer, 2006](#)). Yorke defines graduate employability as ‘a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes - that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefits themselves, the workplace, the community and the economy’ ([Yorke, 2006 p.8](#)).

Despite extensive research [Knight and Yorke, \(2003b\)](#) believe there is no single, ideal strategy for enhancing employability but argue it must be linked to teaching and learning. Experiential learning is often heralded as the key to successful development of employability attributes using placements, work experiences or live projects ([Moon, 2004](#)) as it ‘is the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment’ ([Beard and Wilson, 2013 p.26](#)). It builds on Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle ([Kolb, 2015 p.51](#)) in which learners take in information via concrete experience, transform this information via reflective observation, assimilate through abstract conceptualisation and form the basis of new experiences through active experimentation.

The CareerEDGE Employability Development model ([Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007](#)) highlights key employability attributes (career development, work experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence) but also acknowledges the importance of reflection. Therefore, to facilitate reflection students complete the CareerEDGE Profile questionnaire, available in [Lumley \(2013 p.20-21\)](#), before the module begins and after the module is completed.

Research Approach

The research explored student perceptions of the value of integrating employability skills in a final year credit bearing experiential learning module, and the role reflection played in the development of employability skills. The research involved in-depth interviews with 9 students and 2 department career coaches. The interviews were conducted after grades were finalised to allay any student participation concerns. A self-selecting sample was deemed appropriate as this was a small-scale exploratory study. The sample consisted of 3 males and 6 females of which 4 were from the UK, 3 from Europe and 2 from the Far East. Despite a self-selecting sample, this provided a good range of respondents with differing backgrounds and nationalities.

The interviews were transcribed and 'thematic analysis' ([Braun and Clarke, 2022](#)) used to identify key themes.

Findings and Discussion

Students recognised the value of MKTG310 as it provided them with an opportunity to gain valuable consultancy skills and learn through 'experience' as opposed to lectures, seminars and reading.

'I think the only way to develop these types of skills is through experiential learning as opposed to reading and writing about it' (Student: Peter).

This supports [Moon's \(2004\)](#) belief experiential learning develops employability attributes and acts as the bridge between the person and the workplace. The career coaches echoed the views of the students and highlighted the importance of practicing skills.

'I wouldn't undersell how important it is to do something with a real-life employer in a real-life setting.... it gives [students] the opportunity to practice those skills in the safe environment of the uni' (Coach: Kirsty).

The data highlighted career coaches made the distinction between 'pushing' knowledge and letting students experience it, which relates to the difference between didactic teaching and experiential learning ([Kolb, 2015](#)).

'lots of events - employer events and lectures around employability... kind of pushing rather than letting them experience it... and then [the students] are able to articulate the value, rather than being told what it is' (Coach: Emily).

Many HEIs see the value of compulsory employability modules to ensure all students participate ([Grove, 2017](#)). The findings support this view, and students agreed some students do not engage with employability initiatives unless they are credit bearing.

'Some people don't take it very seriously because there is no assessment' (Student: Katy).

Many students were sceptical at first about the reflections but by the end of the module, they recognised the benefits.

'they were really useful as I did not realise I had learnt so much until I was writing them and then I thought wow I have learnt quite a lot. Especially when I compared it to the one I had done before' (Student: Fiona).

The research revealed experience is important but not sufficient and does not automatically produce 'work ready' graduates. The extent to which students transform into employable graduates is influenced by many different factors such as individual characteristics, 'labour-market orientation' ([Nelson and Sandberg, 2017](#)), prior experience and degree of self-efficacy. The opportunity to reflect on pre and post-work experience in a structured manner was revealed as an essential component of any university employability initiative. This reflection enabled students to formally recognise their improvements and articulate their strengths for job applications and interviews.

Conclusion

This research provided interesting insights into the experiences of final year marketing students preparing to graduate and enter the world of work. Students were highly engaged in the module with evaluation scores consistently above 4 (very good). The study supports previous work such

as [Moon, \(2004\)](#) suggesting experiential learning ([Kolb, 2015](#)) in the form of work experience opportunities is key to developing employability attributes. However, it is clear experience alone is insufficient and the key to building effective skills and attributes is providing students with a reflective assessment.

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