

The student journey: time to make it personal

Jo Morrissey

Faculty of Science, Liverpool John Moores University, James Parsons Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF, UK

Contact: j.morrissey@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Current discussion about graduate employability and career options for graduates provides the opportunity to assess the degree choices students make and the skills they learn. As part of an LJMU Curriculum Development Internship, two students contacted employers in the forensic science (and related industries) field and identified skills that employers feel that graduates lack. Three sessions were then devised to embed these enterprise/personal skills into a skills module. Student engagement was excellent and further work is now being undertaken to embed similar sessions into subject specific modules.

Keywords

personal skills; enterprise; graduate careers; employability; entrepreneurship; forensic science

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The outgoing head of UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), Mary Curnock Cook, caused a bit of a stir when indicating, quite forcefully, that the “obsession” with careers is unhelpful (*The Telegraph*, 25 April 2017). So what, in her view, is the motivation to come to university? For Curnock Cook, higher education is an opportunity to broaden one’s horizons, to engage with a subject that “sets your brain on fire.” Drawing upon her personal experience, she then goes on to advise, “students may need to take some down-time... there’s [no] harm in doing temporary, voluntary or non-graduate work to fill the gap before finding something more permanent.” These comments made me reflect on my role as a teacher and, more importantly, on some of the initiatives I have led that are aimed at helping our learners become well-rounded people as they leave university.

In forensic science, my subject, the influence of TV (and popular culture) has frequently been suggested as the biggest influence on course choice for students. I have never wholly believed in this, and do work with students who are really engaged in the subject. Where I really empathise with Curnock Cook is the sense that Forensic Science students *think* they have a career path already mapped for them, like those doing, say Medicine or Pharmacy. The fact is, a job in Forensic Science doesn’t always follow. It is, therefore, necessary to equip students with the broader skills and insights that will hold them in good stead in the immediate and longer term.

The stimulus to do so comes, not just from the Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) metrics, which, incidentally, doesn’t evade Curnock Cook’s critical gaze, but a host of other ideas and frameworks. For instance, many colleagues

will have engaged with the QAA’s (2012) *Enterprise and Entrepreneurship* guidance that attempts to help those to integrate employability and enterprise skills into the degree curriculum. Developing the conversation with like-minded people in the university is another key factor and, at LJMU, a community of practice to sustain discussions has been a tremendous boost to my own endeavours. To trial new ideas, it is also helpful to have some funding, and we were lucky enough to receive some as part of LJMU’s Curriculum Internship programme this academic year.

The project we hatched was relatively simple. Two students made contact with relevant employers and asked them for their views and observations on the personal skills lacked by recent graduates. They were then asked to recommend the personal skills courses they thought should merit inclusion within an academic programme. Their counsel to us was insightful. The main areas identified were; communication skills; professionalism (timekeeping, work ethic etc.); and using one’s initiative or creativity (including problem solving).

From this intelligence, three sessions were developed and run as workshops for Level 4 students. Further, the intelligence from the employers was consistent with personal experiences in my previous career, when I had been involved in the recruitment of graduates in the workplace. One of the biggest challenges was in finding applicants able to hit the ground running; many graduates had the technical skills but lacked the problem solving skills or were not able to articulate clearly their opinions and ideas. The three sessions were initially run as part of a skills module and, although some content was programme specific, they were primarily stand-alone and generic.

The most effective session was one that encompassed a wide array of pertinent topics: teamwork, communication, listening,

cooperation with other groups, problem-solving and presentation. Students worked in their tutorial groups and represented different interest groups involved in the development of a 'body farm'. Feedback was extremely positive, largely attributable to the 'real life' scenarios created (i.e. students could relate to this).

This session was particularly effective because it was subject specific. Students could understand the relevance of this exercise to their programme of study and were able to use the forensic science knowledge they had to assist them in their communication and negotiations with other groups. Analysis of the feedback from these sessions indicates that when these types of sessions are embedded in to programmes students prefer them to be subject specific, especially when placed in skills modules. As mentioned we started the initial work with first year students and, in the following year, will involve Level 5 students (and hopefully, in future, it will form part of core subject specific modules across the curriculum).

Student engagement with this activity underlines the positive impact of the university experience; it can be seen as the first part of an exciting journey for students. It should not be viewed in isolation from the rest of their time and can be a positive step towards continuous lifelong skills development.

In my opinion, university is about more than just a degree. It is an important, ongoing and exciting challenge to develop academic citizenship, to enable social mobility by widening participation opportunities and to develop the next generations of employees, business owners and leaders.

- **Jo Morrissey** is Programme Leader in Forensic Science at the School of Pharmacy and Biomedical Science, LJMU

References

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