Divinity – Online Academic Skills Course: ‘Making the most of your time at University’ module

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**School/Subject area:** Divinity

**Target Audience:** Early years undergraduate students (but emphasis on first year)

**Staff Involved:** Course Organiser and Career Adviser for School of Divinity

**Date:** Careers Service module launched November 2008, now ongoing

Key features

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Both the Careers Service and the School were aware of the importance of encouraging students to make the most of their time at University. During discussion with the Career Adviser for the School, the Director of UG studies suggested this online course as an ideal vehicle to encourage early years’ students to proactively seek development opportunities. It was agreed that the Careers Service would develop a new employability module and help students understand that ‘a degree alone is not enough’ and also to encourage engagement with the Service.

With New College being located separately from central campus, a virtual tour of the Careers Service was agreed as a key feature to be included in the new module. This will increase students’ familiarity with the Service and develop their understanding of the range of support available to them.

Currently the course is non-compulsory and non-credit bearing, although will appear on the student’s University transcript, and they are strongly encouraged to complete it by the end of their second year. From academic year 2010/11 the course will be compulsory and students will not be able to progress to Honours until satisfactory completion. They will have the opportunity to resit in their second year, and some form of summer ‘crash course’ will be available ultimately, to enable progression to third year.

Planning and development

An initial meeting took place between the Academic Skills Course Organiser and the Career Adviser to discuss the course structure and module format, to enable appropriate module design. The Career Adviser also met with the Employability Consultancy at this stage to discuss ideas.

Some time was required for the Adviser to design and create the new module, during which there was some liaising with the Course Organiser. Key stages included: deciding overall content; creating a suitable framework; drafting and creating written content; pulling together relevant information and the production of resources.

The assessment element (or quiz) also took time to develop – it was critical that its structure enabled learning even if the student chose to go straight to the quiz rather than engaging with any of the rich content! The quiz questions are multiple choice, relate to each of the module’s sections, and are intended to be straightforward to complete if the student has engaged with the preceding module content.

Project

The employability module forms part of an existing online Academic Skills Course for first year Divinity students through WebCT.

Though online, the Course Organiser does run an introductory lecture in which the Careers Service and School Library are involved. The various modules included are released at different times to allow a step-by-step approach through the module at appropriate times. A 30 minute timetabled lecture is delivered by the Careers Service to introduce the employability module before release, and encourage wider consideration of the topic and issues.

The employability module is called ‘Getting the most out of your time at University’ and encourages students to do just that. There are six sections to work through, enabling completion of a short compulsory assessment ‘quiz’ at the end. The six sections are a combination of information, resources and activities, which include:

* **Introduction** – carefully setting the scene and explaining the module rationale
* **Virtual tour of Careers Service** – photographs of each room, highlighting the most relevant information in each, and asking the student to carry out certain tasks
* **What can I do with my degree?**– includes links to the destination information of previous Divinity graduates, employability profiles and other useful resources to support students in initial exploration of their options
* **Be an Early Bird!** – a Careers Service leaflet for early years students, with some questions to encourage reflection (and action) on what it means for them personally
* **SAGE (Careers Service employer and vacancy database)** – information and tasks showing students how to use this valuable job hunting/work experience resource
* **Why bother?** – encourages students to set up an informational interview with someone who graduated in the last 10 years, includes a few questions for guidance e.g. is there anything you know now, that you wish you had known when you were at university?

Resources

Course Organiser time in meeting to discuss the project, inputting new content and meeting to make final revisions.

Career Adviser time for module concept, design and creation.

Relevant staff time for the short lectures.

As the course is online there are no paper-based resources, everything is available via WebCT. Resources include text, weblinks, photographs, a pdf document and a multiple choice quiz.

Impact

Using an innovative approach, this module introduces first year students to the concept that ‘a degree alone is not enough.’ They are encouraged to explore what this means to them, and what they can personally do about it by making the most of their time at University, and so enhancing their employability.

As a result of creating this module, students will also have a greater awareness of the Careers Service itself and feel more inclined to engage with it from the start of their studies, rather than seeing it as something for their final year.

The module provides a useful template easily transferable for use in other Schools. It utilises an environment that students are comfortable and familiar with, and encourages engagement in a novel and unthreatening way. The module has also provided the inspiration for a new virtual resource, ‘Making the most of university’ now available on the Careers Service website.

Advice

Getting students to complete the whole course has been a challenge – this issue will be resolved from academic year 2010/11 when the course is made compulsory. If setting up a similar optional course, it is important to consider how students will be made aware of the course and how they will be encouraged to work with it.

Writing content that both informs and engages, and gets the right balance between information and activities can take time. Careful thought is required around any key messages specific to the School or subject area, and sections added or tailored as appropriate.

The virtual tour is a useful feature to help ‘demystify’ the Careers Service, enabling students to see what it looks like inside. An entrance can be a surprising hurdle to those unfamiliar with what lies beyond!

The School of Divinity and Careers Service worked closely in the development, and continue to do so as the course becomes ever more established. Such partnership is an important success factor.

Key contacts

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<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/online-academic-skills-course>