Employer-led Employability Workshops

The context for this initiative stems from the most recent UG Programmes Review and employability review within the Business School.

**School/Subject Area:** Business School

**Target Audience:**Honours Years Business Studies students

**Staff Involved:** Director of Undergraduate Programmes, Careers Adviser

**Dates/timings:** Launched December 2008, now ongoing

Key features

The context for this initiative stems from the most recent UG Programmes Review and employability review within the Business School. The objectives of the original pilot workshop were:

* to be more responsive to the stated needs of graduate employers;
* to help support a more outward-looking approach; and
* to act as an awareness-raising exercise in employability skills for students.

What emerged was a series of employer–led, optional, 2-hour workshops for up to 45 Honours Business Studies students. Workshops were timed to fall outside teaching weeks, to maximise attendance.

A key feature was the collaborative nature of both the workshop development and delivery, with both the academic lead and the Careers Adviser having facilitation roles within the session, as well as input to content. This is felt to have resulted in a well-rounded and comprehensive product and a better student experience, particularly as care was taken to ensure the messages were made generic at important points and not exclusive to the lead employer.

Topics so far have covered a practically-focussed session on a range of employability skills, ‘10 Steps to Employability’, led by PwC, and a presentations skills workshop, ‘Getting your Point Across’, led originally by KPMG, and subsequently by Proctor & Gamble. Future workshop topics will include networking and group-work skills, reflecting the demands of both the academic programmes and the need to compete effectively in a tough job market.

**For the employer**, such workshops offer the opportunity to deliver employability messages and materials in an interactive session. They can provide valuable face-time with students, and enable employers to convey clear messages to potential applicants about recruitment expectations.

**For students**, these workshops responded to their articulated desire to receive clear messages about employability and employer engagement from their School, and for opportunities to develop those skills further within their School. To meet and work with an employer on a relatively personal level was also viewed as valuable.

**For the Careers Service**, it allowed broad messages to be conveyed through specific employer examples, ensuring those messages were getting across accurately and without bias, and raising awareness of employer expectations and how students can prepare themselves to meet them.

**For the School**, and the academic lead, the key benefits included:

* enabling her, as co-facilitator, to link feedback to academic course activities, e.g. group-work, and how it relates to evidence of employability skills development;
* led by an employer, these workshops lent the messages more credibility with students than if coming only from within the University;
* students worked together in mixed groups, across year groups and subject specialisms, practising many employability skills in ‘real-time’ but, importantly within a non-assessed setting. These included, group-working, communication, presentation and organisation skills;
* students learned what PwC and other major graduate employers were seeking when recruiting; and
* contrary to their original beliefs, students found they did have experience and evidence of relevant employability skills from their academic, extra-curricular or working lives. They were then able to practice articulating it – a confidence building experience!

Planning

Following an initial scoping meeting between the Careers Adviser and the academic lead, the adviser met with the employer representative on two further occasions for a total of around 2-3 hours to finalise content. Much of this already existed, developed either by the employer or the Careers Service. It was more a question of tweaking and refining materials to ensure appropriate balance and positioning, together with the creation of several practical activities within the session.

To market the workshops, the School sent out emails to all Honours students, engaged with the student Business Society to publicise the workshops and mentioned the events at the start of many lectures. The Careers Adviser also referred to them in talks and 1:1 meetings with relevant students.

Workshops

The 2-2.5 hour workshops have hosted 25 – 35 attendees per session. Beginning with the ’10 Steps to Employability’ event, all workshops have had a highly practical bias, requiring at least three instances of collaborative small-group work and a presentation. Employers led the delivery and facilitation, with the lead academic and Careers Adviser co-facilitating, including a ‘top & tail’ contextualising of the session and real-time presentation feedback. The aim is for each session to be characterised by pace, relevance, energy and interaction.

Within the ’10 Steps’ workshop participants were offered the opportunity to:

* recognise employability experience/skills already gained
* develop ideas on how to gain new experience, and plug gaps
  + need to be creative, and to keep developing fresh evidence
  + recognise opportunities within studies as well as extra-curricular
* better articulate their skills and evidence in a selection process
* practise two of ‘10 steps’ in workshop (experiential approach)
  + lead and contribute to team success
  + communicate with impact and empathy
* network/share ideas with a ‘new’ group of students
* reflect on group-work outputs and presentation materials after the event
  + linked to PwC and Careers Service support materials
  + opportunity to ask the employer questions during a short post-event reception with refreshments

Resources

* Lecture or seminar room space conducive to group-work activities
* Training materials via on-screen presentation and group-task instructions
* Presentation materials for participants (e.g. basic flipchart resources or transparencies)
* Marketing emails or other publicity materials (e.g. flyers/posters)
* Follow-up emails containing a PDF of the workshop presentation and group outputs

Evaluation

Although no formal, systematic method of evaluation has yet been used, anecdotal feedback gathered by the academic lead included comments such as:

* ‘It was the most useful workshop I’ve attended during my time at Uni.’
* ‘I particularly liked being able to put my own experiences into context’
* ‘It was good to get chance to practise some skills without anyone assessing us’

Professor Wendy Loretto, Director of Undergraduate Programmes at the Business School, speaks about the motivations, challenges and benefits of developing an Employability Workshop – '10 Steps to Enmployability' – in collaboration with the University's Careers Service and PwC, a major graduate employer.

Advice

We are still refining and adapting our approach to these sessions, but a number of key tips and learnings have so far emerged, which we would like to share.

* Making the effort to involve all the stakeholders in the development and delivery of the sessions leads to a more rounded and fully-supported event, in which it is possible to illustrate the:
  + tie-in of employability examples to academic experiences;
  + tie-in of employability examples to actual roles within the company.
* Securing a mix of participant year groups, courses and backgrounds can result in a more meaningful and authentic peer-to-peer student experience.
* The choice of employer for collaboration is very important. It is always worth getting advice and potential recommendations from the Careers Service.
* Such a workshop approach should be used in conjunction with many other mediums to convey key employability messages to students. It is not a one-stop solution, not least because you cannot guarantee that this will cover all students – no matter how good the marketing!
* These workshops built on the content of a compulsory, non-credit-bearing Year 2 course, called Career Development Planning,  also co-delivered by the academic lead and Adviser. This and other prior knowledge of and involvement in the curriculum by the Careers Adviser proved helpful to the targeted development of the workshops. More information about Career Development Planning can be foudn on the link below:

[Career Development Planning](http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/career-development-planning)

* The School or subject area does not have to be perceived as a ‘vocational’ programme for such events to work effectively or for employers to be interested in engaging with students and academics in such a way – equivalent sessions could potentially be developed in other Schools.

Key contacts

Ruth Saville, Careers Adviser

Professor Wendy Loretto,  Business School Director of Undergraduate Programmes

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/employer-led-workshops>