

## **Partnerships for Assessment Designed to Enhance Student Employability**

**Tim Palazon**, Senior Lecturer, Cardiff School of Education.

**Anita Norcott**, Employability Learning Specialist, Careers Service

This paper will initially provide the employability development context for the modified Humanities/Education Studies programmes and then focus on the Partnerships for Assessment element, specifically the mock interview assessment.

The 2015/16 modifications to the Humanities/Education Studies programmes in the School of Education reflect a response to Welsh Government and employer requirements for enhanced graduate employability attributes. These include attributes such as: multi-cultural awareness; sustainable development strategies; entrepreneurial and change management attitudes and abilities. Other, key capabilities include team working and interpersonal skills. The CBI (2015 p57 ) cites 'worrying weaknesses in graduates' basic skills and general readiness for employment' Employers are reported as having concerns with issues such as problem-solving, communication and team working skills. General work readiness was also highlighted as problematic.

Raising aspiration in terms of potential labour market destinations constitutes a key element of the rationale underpinning the modifications under scrutiny. From 2015/16 a new level four module focusses upon: generic employability skills; researching employment opportunities (including self-employment and social enterprise); an evaluation of the importance of impression management and networking opportunities and consideration of the year two placement. The argument here is that, given increasing graduate numbers, employers seek evidence of skills and experience beyond academic capability expressed by a degree classification. Consequently, Morrison (2014 A) cites the importance of cultural and social capital in engendering advantage in an arena of increasing competition.

Traditional destinations for many students from the programmes have been in teaching or as teaching assistants. At level five, a greater emphasis is now placed on the importance of lifelong learning, with a new module of that name. The purpose here is to develop student consideration of the variety of employment avenues available post-graduation as a potential compensation for issues raised by Morrison (2014 B). These include demographic change in Wales, falling numbers of initial Teacher Training opportunities and school closure strategies in response to fewer role vacancies and funding cuts.

The level five work based placement module retains the formal mock interview as an assessment and now also examines issues of leadership and management in education related settings with a focus on enhanced labour market aspiration. As of 2014, 75% of Cardiff School of Education graduates surveyed who were in

employment reported being in professional level employment. When questioned about potential career destinations during personal tutor meetings and mock interview feedback, a minority of students reported their intended career destinations as occupations in educational settings that required a level three qualification and with little or no aspiration toward longer term career development. The module modifications are designed to create a situation such as that advocated by Turner (2014) where learning opportunities contribute to the development of students' self-belief in their ability to achieve enhanced personal goals. Key to this process is the development of the ability to plan and implement strategies to facilitate goal achievement.

Central to the process of module design and assessment restructuring has been the development of a closer collaboration with Cardiff Metropolitan University's Careers Service. The co-design of modules is thus underpinned by two sets of related expertise. Career development skills e-lessons and appropriate outputs are provided by the Careers Service to facilitate student self-directed learning and self-motivation. This results in an opportunity for students to consider concepts such as personal career planning theory within the context of academic topics such as life-long learning theory. Examples developed and delivered in collaboration to date include: lead lectures, seminars, the blended-learning approach and related assessments which require students to consider a variety of career destinations. For a further inspection of careers service and academic collaboration see Ledwith (2014)

The rationale for the mock interview assessment was based upon personal experience as a module leader and feedback from PGCE admissions staff when asked to comment upon reasons for non-acceptance of Education Studies students with strong degree classifications. Candidates were reported by admissions staff as being selected for interview on the basis of their degree classification and references from personal tutors but rejected for a PGCE place on the basis of an inability to respond to the demands of a formal interview situation. Comments from third year students and recent graduates who requested references in support of other employment opportunities reflected a similar pattern. The previous assessment consisted of an essay in which students were asked to reflect upon the employability skills they considered necessary in their chosen work based placement. Many students chose to ignore the marking criteria and to write mainly about the teaching they had observed.

The mock interview employs a formal format with students being expected to adhere to appropriate dress codes. They are filmed on an individual basis and made available to students on disc for future reflection. The process allows students an opportunity to engage in an experiential learning activity that reflects a 'real world' situation, rather than be passive recipients of information. Individual feedback sessions give students an opportunity to reflect upon and comment about what they have learned and the resultant future implications and planning. (Crews and Hemby 2009).

Interview panels, where possible, consist of three panel members. At least one panel member is an academic staff member in order to comply with Cardiff Metropolitan University assessment regulations. Other panel members are drawn from a variety of external organisations and sectors. The perceived value here is that external panel members provide objective feedback upon individual candidate's performance. This is informed by panel members' experience of contemporary labour market requirements and conditions. Examples of external panel members include: Head teachers and Deputy Head teachers from primary and secondary schools; small business owners; employers, senior managers and directors drawn from the voluntary sector.

A significant contribution to mock interview staffing is made by Cardiff Metropolitan University Careers Service staff. This has added value in that during interview feedback students gain a greater awareness of support available from the Careers Service. The forgoing also avoids a potential scenario identified by Hansen et al (2009) where peer assessed mock interviews are more likely to be treated less seriously as an assessment.

A further indicator of the increasing collaboration with the Careers Service is provided by the implementation of practical seminars on interview skills. These are experiential in order to prepare students for the forthcoming assessment. Students are introduced to the varying kinds of interview questions that they may encounter in interview situations. Other concepts scrutinised include the importance of first impressions, eye contact and body language. See Cottrell (2013). Students are also encouraged to access individual support with interview preparation provided by the Careers Service.

The interview questions require students to reflect in depth upon their potential career path and how this has been influenced by their observations and evaluations gained developed during their work placement. Question examples include an analysis of skills and knowledge required as an effective practitioner in their chosen field. Students are also expected to reflect in depth upon key contemporary issues in respect of their placement or probable field of employment. This question serves as an effective indicator of the level of preparatory research undertaken by students prior to their mock interview. Many students lose a significant amount of marks due to a lack of research despite being briefed about the importance of this element of the assessment in seminars. This raises questions regarding an apparent minimal intrinsic academic engagement by some students. For Ainley and Allen (2010) inter-relating factors including the graduatisation of the labour market and student perceptions of locus of control. Farenga and Mc Quinlan (2015) offer that students from less affluent working class backgrounds may find that the university environment takes them beyond their usual comfort zone and this contributes to a perceived lack of possibility. Turner (2014) offers that stronger self-belief is an indicator of greater individual resilience and ability to apply greater effort to meet new challenges and recommends that the development of self-belief in relation to employability should therefore be included in under graduate studies..

Overall, cross departmental collaboration to date in respect of the development of learning and teaching materials has proved successful. The use of mock interviews has been very well received by a large majority of students who have undertaken the assessment. Students who admit to a lack of preparation upon the receipt of a lower grade than expected, reflect favourably upon the exercise as a learning experience. A minority of students have reacted to constructive feedback in an inappropriate manner.

Support from senior management in CSE and the Careers Service has been a key element of success. Resourcing and supporting the logistics the interviews process for some 214 students is a growing challenge as student numbers increase. CSE staff members are currently allocated twenty one teaching hours per year to take part as panel members. The main risk in the exercise is that of non – attendance at short notice by external panel members and a continued reliance on good will as there is no current budget to pay externals. Planned future activity includes further collaboration within Cardiff Metropolitan University that will include Human Resources and the increased involvement of the Careers Service in order to draw upon a wider range of potential panel members. Approaches will also be made to external organisations in order to broaden the range of student placements and to engage with a wider variety of potential external panel members.

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