Tailoring professional development to postgraduate students: it's not the chicken, it's the egg

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Abstract

Graduate employability and professional development are more commonly discussed in an undergraduate context. Yet many postgraduate students seek professional development as part of their programme of study. There are challenges in providing an in-programme tailored, person-centered professional development offer at post graduate level when student cohorts are often large and international. This case study explores a professional development provision embedded into a master's programme, centred on developing self-reflection through experiential learning approaches. The students tailor their path through taught workshops and lived experiences, to recognise gaps and take actions to fulfil their development needs; during their studies, and as reflective practitioners of the future. The paper concludes there is a need for self-reflection to be practised and assessed as part of a professional development provision at master's level, but that measuring the impact of developing this skill in an individual cannot be accurately captured immediately post-graduation.

Keywords: *Postgraduate; professional development; employability; self-reflection; tailored.*

1. Introduction

Graduate employment outcomes, captured in the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) and other employability measures are of significance to the 'triple helix' of higher education institutions (HEIs), industry and government (Etztowitz, 2003). These outcomes have societal and economic impacts and are cited as one of the top reasons students chose to go to university by Universities UK (2022). Employment outcomes are used in the Financial Times business school rankings as a measure of return on investment. Such crude calculations overlook additional gains for individuals, some of which may not be recognised until later in their working lives. Capturing postgraduate outcomes in this way is less common.

'Employability' on the part of the individual depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes and the way those assets are used and presented to employers (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). McQuaid and Lindsay (2005, p. 205) argued such a "hollowed out" definition of employability focuses on the supply side only, ignoring labour market demand that enables those with the requisite competencies to become employed. Winterton and Turner (2019, p. 538) show inconsistencies in the attributes employers claim to want from graduates. Notwithstanding these concerns, most HEIs develop employability practices that focus on enabling students to achieve GOS measures of 'success' by developing skills and work readiness techniques. Graduate skills and attitudes most desired by employers are prominent in HEI curricula, but overwhelmingly focused on undergraduate provision.

Graduates are not "oven ready chickens" perfectly prepared for the graduate jobs market (Atkins, 1999) and two graduates from the same programme do not necessarily have the same professional aspirations. Rather than seeking to deliver the chicken, HEIs might better focus attention on the egg: the egg as the individual; the nucleus, with all the potential to develop into a functional individual who can contribute to, and gain satisfaction from, the world of work. The outcomes for the egg are in many ways yet to be determined, depending on nurture, nourishment and support. A successful HEI employability offer should be centred on developing self-reflection and personal action and in turn, providing the egg with what is needed. This kind of employability input should start much sooner than a student's arrival in a master's programme, as early as primary education according to Kashefpakdel, Rehill & Hughes (2018). The role of HEIs is to enable students to identify and explore their professional development needs and provide a menu of opportunities to meet these.

Considering 'sought after' skills can be useful in framing professional development provision for post graduates. However, re-focusing such provision to a person-centred approach, with the student owning their professional development and tailoring their learning through effective self-reflection and action, offers a more flexible and aspirational approach to employability. In this way students can determine what 'success' means to them as individuals rather than trying to conform to a 'one size fits all' measure.

2. Professional development provision

For the postgraduate taught programme in human resource management at a Russell Group business school with a large and international student cohort, the professional development provision evolved over a decade into an offer tailored to individual needs. The provision is embedded and recognised as a key component of the programme and while not credit bearing in itself, it is part of the formal timetable and is assessed through the core HRM academic module of the programme. Professional development provision runs parallel to the core module, providing professional development opportunities and experiences in the context of the academic programme as part of co-curricular activities. Students attend professional skill workshops where they are introduced to a development area and provided with context (made aware of why each is being included in their learning offer). The workshops are often active learning experiences in themselves (team challenges, Lego activities, business simulation, action maze, group discussions, for example). They attempt to develop personal and professional skills in the student such as teamworking, presentation, cross cultural communication, commercial awareness, resilience and reflection, alongside digital and technical skills such as video presentation, project management and performance management. Collectively, these workshops provide a buffet of opportunity for students to experience and practise each skill.

Simultaneously, students are part of 'activity teams' that provide vehicles for self-directed experiential learning in team working and collaboration, cross cultural awareness, communication and presentation skills, all set in a framework of self-reflection. Students are ultimately assessed in the core academic modules through team presentations on an academic issue, an individual video presentation and, most significantly, through an individual reflective essay. In this way students experience 'authentic assessment' (Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004, Pg. 69) that is meaningful and contextualised. Motivation for this approach is captured well by Fonteijn and Decker (2021, para. 6): "this is all necessary because we don't want our students to feel that their education is separate from their personal growth and that they are merely jumping through academic hoops until graduation, when their lives start."

The provision also involves a range of optional peripheral opportunities (also contained within the programme rather than centrally positioned) such as e-mentoring, industry projects, networking/alumni events and professional accreditation by MOS (Microsoft Office Specialist) the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development). The central university careers service and the HRM programme intersect to bring value in terms of supporting students with the techniques and etiquettes necessary to enter the graduate labour market, such as job searches, application tuition and mock interviews. The focus here is on the process of gaining entry to the graduate labour market, while the content for the applications and interviews is primarily gained in the above provision.

3. Intentional design principles

The design of the postgraduate professional development deliberately involved the following principles:

- Experiential, active and uncomfortable
- Engagement, feedback and belonging
- Integrative learning and assessment

3.1. Experiential, active and uncomfortable

Kolb's learning theory (Kolb, 1984) informs the experiential and active approach that underpins the professional development provision in this instance. Experiential teaching and learning practices of this nature are encouraged by business school accrediting bodies like AACSB (LeClair, 2018), but come with warnings of 'explicit moral duty' on the part of the HEI to protect all stakeholders from what can create uncomfortable and new learning experiences (Lund Dean, Wright & Forray, 2020). However, in general terms, and depending on a students preferred learning style, being challenged to learn in an uncomfortable space has the potential to create excellent learning outcomes.

This approach also requires effort and a potentially a different skill set on the part of the teaching team too, in order to effectively scaffold and protect students as they learn in this experiential way as part of their activity teams. Here the personal tutor as activity team mentor shows their value. The cautions are worth adhering and mitigating where possible as the potential gains to the student are significant. Activity teams promote 'real play, not role play' (Forster & Robson, 2019, Pg. 358) as students explore their team working and collaboration abilities; taking ownership of their learning. Significantly, active learning is noted as one of the 'Top 15 skills for 2025' by the World Economic Forum (Future of Jobs Report, 2020, Pg. 36.).

3.2. Engagement, feedback and belonging

The reflective essay as an assessment, guarantees an element of student engagement with this format, but the potential value is much greater than this one grade on a student's transcript. The process of understanding and practicing in small episodes (through the workshops) then experiencing 'for real' in activity teams when preparing team presentations, informs the reflective essay that follows, where reflections and future actions are captured by the student.

Students are encouraged to seek feedback from their peers to inform these reflections, allowing reflection in action and on action (Schon, 1983). Formative feedback is also gained from the professional skills workshops, personal tutors who mentor the activity teams, 1:1 meetings with the professional skills tutor and peers on the programme, allowing students to explore different team roles/contributions and build resilience and empathy in their

understanding of team contributions and effective team working. Here students are co-creators of their own learning.

There are also gains in terms of 'belonging'; both from a sense on the part of the student in the team and on the programme, but also 'belonging' in terms of the programme's ownership of the teaching and learning process.

3.3. Integrative learning and assessment

Importantly, our model seeks to comfort criticisms from traditional educationalists that competence-based approaches to education are crowding out knowledge in the curriculum and that the true purpose of HEIs is to develop a students' ability to critique rather than simply serve the employers' agenda (Young, 2007). Our model for professional development allows both agendas to co-exist and not one at the expense of the other. Research-led academic content remains untouched, but the compulsory co-curricular tailored offer that runs parallel, develops the student's professional skills and both intersect to provide experiences and opportunities for students to develop. There are signposts, links and references to the academic content in the professional skills offer, encouraging students to think, learn and reflect on the whole programme, including the experiences of critically engaging with the academic content of the core programme. This integrative learning approach is assessed by the reflective essay that requires students to synthesise and make connections in their experiences, knowledge and skill development across the entire programme through articulation of personal critical reflective comment. This may also be an example of 'synoptic assessment' more commonly adopted in 16-18 year educational programme design but may feature more in HEI educational design going forward if student learning is indeed enhanced by this approach. (Constantinou, 2020).

4. Challenges

The international make-up of the HRM master's programme student cohort is similar to many postgraduate business school cohorts across the UK. This presents additional gains, but also different challenges and some questions yet to be answered. Working collaboratively in cross-cultural teams and the wider programme cohort, presents the opportunity for students develop a 'global mindset' (part of most leading business school education strategies), through exposure to other students from different nationalities, cultural backgrounds and other diversifying factors. However, these gains are limited by a student's language ability, pre-conceived ideas of how to learn in an educational environment and a range of (conscious or unconscious) bias. Perceptions (cultural or otherwise) of the value of co-curricular workshops and activities can also impact on attendance. Arguably, these factors are also areas of our responsibility to include and address in programme as part of the student's development. Further, the skills we look to develop in the postgraduate professional

development provision – to question, to be curious, to work effectively as part of a team, scaffolded by self-reflection – neglects the geography of where students will ultimately be seeking employment. Country context matters here in terms of economic, political and cultural influences and expectations. Are the skills we look to evoke desirable for graduates in all country labour markets?

Evaluating the success of this professional development approach is hampered by the same challenges referred to in the opening paragraph of the paper; the desired outcome is to develop the student into a self-aware, reflective and lifelong learner and this is not easily captured or measured at the immediate end point of graduation. However, to inform our way forward, baseline data of student's perceptions of their professional skills have been collected at the entry point to the programme and future work will capture perceptions upon completion of the programme, allowing initial evaluation.

5. Conclusions

There is a strong case for an element, or elements, of self-reflection to feature in all HEI post graduate professional development provision, whether or not it is assessed, to ensure students authentically recognise the value of their experiences and take away genuine learning that can influence their future actions. Without this, students risk becoming robots, chasing only graded activity as a homogeneous mass. Indeed, if every graduate emerged with the same repertoire of employability skills any market advantage would disappear (Akins, 1999, p. 272). Self-reflection and trained articulation will allow them to stand out as unique and demonstrate their potential to employers.

However, the success of the professional development offer discussed above (the value to the individual), is only recognised if the skills of reflection are sufficiently developed, and this may be an area for further consideration. Here, the narrative needs particular attention because students need to understand the pedagogical approach sufficiently to appreciate why and how we are meeting their professional development needs in the programme. The aim is for them to understand the value of the professional skill workshops, the activity teams, the assessments and their intended outcomes. Being more explicit in this respect is intended to surface skill requirements allowing students more effectively to recognise and to articulate the skills/assets they have gained and their transferable nature (Daubney, 2021). Moreover, the contribution of a HEI to a postgraduate's professional development officially lasts 12 months but should continue to deliver beyond this to develop students' self-reflective abilities and effectively enthuse them to become reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). That aspiration is clear, but the challenge is in capturing and measuring this as an output.

Given the pace of change apparent in the current labour market, the skills, competencies and knowledge required of our postgraduates will continue to change. Employability is "a

continually re-constructed concept" (Williams, et al., 2019), and perhaps the only constant is the need for our postgraduates to be self-aware and reflective, in order to move ahead with purpose and advantage. Professional development is a continuous process, potentially without end. Being reflective and acting continuously to develop professionally, coupled with the ability to articulate how experiences have prompted actions to overcome gaps and the subsequent strengths now beheld, will make the graduate unique and when the time is right for them, ready to hatch. As a lifelong reflective practitioner, they will however, need continuously to "self-baste" (Atkins, 1999).

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