

Different approaches to teaching employability

Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate whether: 1) it is more advantageous to embed employability into degree subject via a skills-based or theory-based approach and 2) it is more advantageous for employability tuition to be departmental-led or careers centre-led. Participants for research question 1 were Year I Literature students who undertook an employability module that adopted either a theory or skills-based teaching approach. The student group who studied on the skills-based module reported greater satisfaction than the student group who studied on the theory-oriented module. There was no difference between the two student groups regarding the outcome measures of engagement and achievement. Participants for research question 2 were again two groups of Year 1 Literature students whereby one group studied an employability module led by departmental academics and the other group undertook an employability module led by careers staff. The outcome measures were student engagement, achievement and satisfaction with the careers led group demonstrating greater engagement and reporting a trend for increased satisfaction. However these particular findings were compromised by the industrial action that coincided with the delivery of the academic-led module. In terms of student satisfaction, this study provides clear evidence for engaging students with practical rather than theory-oriented employability. Results were inconclusive with regard to teaching employability from a departmental or careers centre lead. Nonetheless, overall study implications suggest a pressing need to examine whether the more recent employability-in-the-curriculum model is more effective than the original centralised careers service model.

Introduction

Due to a range of political, economic and social factors, universities are under increasing pressure to produce highly skilled graduates that are tailored and ready for the graduate labour market. As a result many higher education institutions (HEIs) are investing more resources into their employability and careers services. Approaches to enhancing graduate employability vary from one institution to another, but many have chosen to integrate employability as a compulsory component into the curriculum (Foskett & Johnston, 2006; Stanbury, 2005; Knight & Yorke, 2004). This strategy is designed to have a more regulated and wider reach and impact on student employability compared to a model that relies on students voluntarily engaging with a central careers service.

Given that credit-bearing employability education is a relatively recent undertaking, research on its teaching and assessment is in the early stages of development. Besides the pedagogical nuances of employability, it has yet to be established whether a curriculum embedded approach is more successful if led and taught by academics with degree subject expertise, or careers staff with employability expertise. Moreover, it is still unclear whether curriculum integration of employability is favourable compared to the traditional non-academic centralised model. Thus there are several key outstanding questions on how HEIs best prepare their students for the graduate world of work, ranging from the fundamental: i.e., which approach – departmental or careers centre led? To the more specific: which teaching methods to use?

The aim of this current research is to address some of the above issues. Whilst all questions cannot be fully resolved in a single study, this piece of research intends to make some advances in this area by examining the different approaches at the University of Essex for embedding credit-bearing employability tuition into degree subjects. The specific research questions to be addressed are: a) is it more advantageous to embed credit-bearing employability into degree subject via a skills-based or theory-based approach? b) Is it more

advantageous for credit-bearing employability tuition to be departmental-led or careers centre-led?

Standage (2017) reported that teaching employability in a format that made intellectual links with the home degree was no more successful with regard to student engagement, achievement and satisfaction compared to a more generic approach that taught employability without intellectual linkage to the home degree. Moreover, an incidental finding was that students showed a preference for skills-based content over and above theoretical teachings.

It was considered that data indicating a potential student preference for practical over academic employability teaching was a sufficiently important finding to warrant further investigation. Thus a cohort of first year Literature students, who undertook a theory-oriented employability module in spring 2016 were compared against a second cohort of first year Literature students who undertook a skills-oriented employability module in spring 2017. The outcome measures were student engagement, achievement and satisfaction and where possible, teaching staff, core content and learning outcomes were kept constant across the two modules. However new assessments were devised in the 2017 module that emphasised real life experiences (e.g., student insight weeks with local businesses), practical skills (e.g., CV writing) and minimised career theory and intellectual linkage. In comparison, with the 2016 module, the academic aspects were made paramount.

In addition, a second comparison was made to examine whether employability tuition is better received by students if the teaching is departmental-led or delivered externally by the careers centre. Research suggests that employability taught in close partnership with careers services, but predominantly led by academics who know the students and the context they work in, is favourable (for an overview see Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton, 2012 & Yorke & Knight, 2006). Thus a cohort of first year Literature students who

undertook an employability module in spring 2017 led by the careers staff was compared with another cohort of first year Literature students who undertook a similar employability module in 2018 that was led by academic staff. As with the previous comparison, the outcomes measures were student engagement, achievement and satisfaction.

Based on the findings of Standage (2017) the first hypothesis of this study is that skills-based employability teaching will be more successful than theory-based employability teaching in terms of student engagement, achievement and satisfaction.

Based on the literature of Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton (2012) & Yorke & Knight (2006) the second hypothesis of this study is that employability tuition will be more successful when led by the home department compared to the central careers service in terms of student engagement, achievement and satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were Year 1 undergraduates from the University of Essex who responded to a survey based on a compulsory credit bearing module taken in the spring term of either 2016 or 2017 or 2018. Twenty eight participants from the 2016 cohort responded out of a possible 159. Twenty three participants from the 2017 cohort responded out of a possible 105. Thirty participants from the 2018 cohort responded out of a possible 101.

Materials

Materials consisted of a survey of 27 statements relating to themes such as level of personalised teaching (sessions individually relevant and stimulating self-development), level of practical learning (e.g., recruitment & selection, graduate labour market), level of experiential learning (e.g., interaction with employers, professionals and peers) and

perceived value of module. Participants responded to each statement on a five point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The survey was built using Qualtrics software and linked (with student permission) to university records regarding degree scheme, coursework submission and academic achievement. See Appendix A.

Procedure

Participants were contacted via their university email and invited to take part in a survey on teaching employability in Higher Education by clicking on an electronic link. Before starting the survey, participants had opportunity to give their consent (or not) for their anonymised data to be used for research purposes. Also participants were informed that the decision to undertake the survey (or not) would have no impact on their academic outcome. All participants who activated the survey (whether completed or not) received a £5 Amazon voucher.

Results

First analysis

This analysis adopted a between subjects design with the grouping variable being the 'type of employability module (skills-based vs. theory-based). There were three dependent variables: **engagement** (measured by class attendance); **achievement** (measured by subtracting participant module mark from year mark) and **satisfaction** (measured by response on a five point Likert scale to the survey question "This module was of value to me").

All data from participant's survey responses and university records were pooled and the means and standard deviations (SD) for the engagement, achievement and satisfaction dependent measures were computed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean (SD) of Study Dependent Variables

	2016 Cohort	2017 Cohort	t-test (df) *	p-value
Engagement Mean(SD)	52.14%(26.44)	55.87%(28.15)	0.49 (49)	.629
Achievement Mean(SD)	Module Mark -Year Mark= - 2.75(5.39)	Module Mark -Year Mark= - 1.91(7.08)	0.48 (49)	.634
Satisfaction Mean(SD)	2.75(1.24)	4.00(0.85)	4.11 (49)	< .001

Significance level was set at .05

* - degrees of freedom

A series of independent samples t-tests (two-tailed) were performed comparing the 2016 cohort with the 2017 cohort on the engagement, achievement and satisfaction dependent measures (see Table 1). The analyses revealed no statistically significant differences between the 2016 and 2017 cohort for engagement or achievement, but did find a significant between-group difference for the satisfaction dependent measure.

Second analysis

This analysis adopted a between subjects design with the grouping variable being 'leadership type' (departmental vs. centralised). As with the first analysis, the dependent variables were: **engagement** (measured by class attendance); **achievement** (measured by subtracting participant module mark from year mark) and **satisfaction** (measured by response on a five point Likert scale to the survey question "This module was of value to me").

Again, all data from participant's survey responses and university records were pooled and the means and standard deviations (SD) for the engagement, achievement and satisfaction dependent measures were computed (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean(SD) of Study Dependent Variables

	2017 Cohort	2018 Cohort	t-test (df) *	p-value
Engagement Mean(SD)	55.87%(28.15)	41.33%(16.97)	2.33 (51)	.024

Achievement Mean(SD)	Module Mark -Year Mark= - 1.91(7.08)	Module Mark -Year Mark= - 0.99(8.00)	0.44 (51)	.662
Satisfaction Mean(SD)	4.00(0.85)	3.50(1.22)	1.67 (51)	.101

Significance level was set at .05

* - degrees of freedom

A series of independent samples t-tests (two-tailed) were performed comparing the 2017 cohort with the 2018 cohort on the engagement, achievement and satisfaction dependent measures (see Table 2). The analyses revealed no statistically significant differences between the 2017 and 2018 cohort for achievement and satisfaction, but did find a significant between-group difference for the engagement dependent measure.

Discussion

The current research aimed to ascertain whether: 1) it is more advantageous to embed credit-bearing employability into degree subject via a skills-based or theory-based approach and 2) whether it is more advantageous for credit-bearing employability tuition to be departmental-led or careers centre-led.

With regard to the first research question, a cohort of Year I Literature students undertaking a theory-oriented employability module in 2016 were compared to another Year 1 cohort of Literature students this time undertaking a skills-oriented employability module in 2017.

Parametric tests for the outcome measures of engagement and achievement yielded no statistically significant differences between the two cohorts. However, the results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups with regard to student satisfaction, with the 2017 cohort who undertook the skills-based module reporting greater satisfaction compared to the 2016 cohort who undertook a theory-oriented module. Thus this study has confirmed the initial findings by Standage (2017) of a clear student preference for practical, skills-based teaching.

With regard to the second research question, the 2017 cohort of Year 1 Literature students who were taught employability by careers staff were compared with an equivalent 2018 cohort who underwent employability tuition led by the departmental academics. As with the first research question, the outcome measures were student engagement, achievement and satisfaction. Results revealed no statistically significant between group-difference for the achievement dependent measure, a marginal significant difference for satisfaction and a clear significant difference for engagement.

The engagement dependent measure was operationalised by student attendance on the module (percentage of total hours expected in classes). The 2017 careers centre led student cohort attended 56% of classes. Whereas the 2018 departmental led student cohort attended 41% of classes. Thus ostensibly, students appear to engage more positively with employability taught by careers staff. However, part of the 2018 module coincided with staff industrial action and this is a clear confound to the engagement results.

With regard to the student satisfaction dependent measure, there was a non-significant trend (p-value of 1.01) for the 2017 students taught employability by careers centre staff to be more satisfied than the 2018 students taught by the academics. However, as with the engagement outcome measure, the level of student satisfaction for the 2018 cohort may well have been affected by the disruption of industrial action. As such, firm conclusions concerning whether employability tuition should be led centrally or within departments cannot be drawn.

Limitations of this research lie in the fact that the designs were quasi-experimental, with no random assignment of participants to conditions, full control over independence of variables or the external environment. As such cause and effect relations cannot be assumed.

Differences in individual student characteristics (e.g., ability, attitude, conscientiousness etc.) may have aligned with the grouping variables. Similarly, environmental variables such as tutor teaching style and more significantly the industrial action for the 2018 cohort taught by

the departmental academics most certainly would have impacted on student engagement with the module and quite possibly affected student satisfaction also.

The key finding of this research is that students are more satisfied with skills-based as opposed to theory-oriented employability tuition. Student satisfaction on two comparable employability modules (with the exception of the skills/theory intervention) was measured and students revealed a highly significant preference for the skills version of the module ($p < .001$). This finding with quantitative data is consistent with the qualitative finding from Standage (2017) and further strengthens the argument for practical employability teaching. The practical components favoured by students included aspects of the labour market relevant to their degree, tips on recruitment and selection and in particular meeting professionals and employers which gave them a 'real' insight into professional working life. Free text comments within the survey also revealed an appreciation of working towards a live job/paid insight experience as an end goal of the module with all teaching and assignments (e.g., CV and Cover letter writing, mock interviews etc.) framed around this main aim. Thus the module was both practical and constructively aligned (Biggs, 1996) complying with pedagogic research.

Given the compelling evidence of student preference for skills over theoretical employability teaching, it becomes difficult to justify employability being included in the curriculum and considered credit-bearing. The absence of intellectual content in employability modules could make learning aims, outcomes and assessment problematic and arguably lower academic standards in relation to discipline-specific modules. The student propensity for practical employability tuition combined with the potential complications of having fairly simplistic skills-based modules that are credit-bearing in the curriculum sets a case for maintaining a centralised model whereby careers staff use their expertise in coaching students on practical and self-awareness skills, leaving academics to focus on discipline relevant teaching in which their expertise lies.

Moreover, a primary purpose of introducing employability into the curriculum was to reach large numbers of students and have wide impact on student prospects. However, attendance at employability modules timetabled into the curriculum is around the 50% mark which somewhat negates the main motivation for curriculum integration of employability.

Further research is required to ascertain whether students are best served employability as a curriculum-embedded model with lecturer involvement or a centralised model whereby students voluntarily engage with a careers service staffed by careers experts who take full responsibility for students' career development. Findings from this study revealing a student preference for practical engagement plus low attendance at scheduled within-curriculum classes points to a return to the centralised model.

References

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- Foskett, R., & Johnston, B., (2006). *Curriculum Development and Career Decision –Making in Higher Education: Credit-Bearing Careers Education*. Manchester, UK: Higher Education Careers Service Unit.
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- Stanbury, D., (2005). *Careers Education Benchmark Statement*. AGCAS: Sheffield.
- Standage, H. (2017). Teaching Academic Employability: A Discipline-Specific versus Holistic Approach? HECSU
- Yorke, M., & Knight, P., (2006). *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum*. Learning and Employability Series One. York, UK: ESECT and HEA.

Appendix A

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements regarding the LT705 (Writing in Society: The Art of Communication) module by checking the appropriate box.

Personalised

Having taken this module, I now think more about my future career

This module made me start to think about my life after University

This module has made me think about my values and strengths in relation to my future job roles.

This module has increased my self-understanding in relation to what work I want to do

The reflective aspects of the module have made me think about my future career in a way that I did not before

The reflective activities on the module were useful for assessing my situation and seeing what I need to do to prepare for my future career

Recruitment and Selection

This module has made me aware of the employer-valued skills I am gaining from my degree

This module has improved my ability to articulate my skills, strengths and values

This module has increased my awareness of the importance of work experience

This module has increased my awareness of the importance of networking

By taking this module, I have a greater understanding of the job application process

By taking this module, I am more equipped to present myself to employers in a positive light.

Market Place

Through this module, I am more aware of the careers support and opportunities available on campus

Through this module, I am more aware of paid and volunteering opportunities available whilst a student at university

By taking this module, I am more aware of the range of roles available to me on graduation

By taking this module, I have an increased insight into the professional world of work

By taking this module I feel more confident speaking with employers and professionals

From taking this module I feel more able to approach employers and professionals for information

Experiential

The involvement of employers and professionals on the module has been of value.

The opportunity to engage with employers and professionals was something positive

The interactive nature of the learning in classes kept me engaged

The rapport with my tutor helped me engage with the module

The discussions with peers in class kept the learning interesting

The module overall needed more theoretical content

The module overall needed more skills-based content

The module overall needed more interactive content

This module was of value to me

Free Text

Other comments on what you liked about the module and why

Other comments on what you disliked about the module and why