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## **I am here to learn biology, not 'personal development': Testing the Blueprint for Careers**

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### **Abstract**

University careers services in the UK are increasingly challenged to contribute to ensuring graduates find, obtain and engage with graduate level opportunities. Parallel to this the range of graduate opportunities has become increasingly competitive. All universities strive to identify and promote their added value to the academic experience.

The Blueprint for Careers (LSIS, 2011a) builds on international practice in developing career management competencies. It offers a useful framework, which can be used by careers professionals to work with students and academics to review and assess the attainment of career competencies. This multi-layered research project utilised an on-line questionnaire, student peer researcher training and focus groups to engage a sample of students across all faculties of the university. The indicative findings present a mixed picture, with students generally feeling most confident about their attitudes to lifelong learning, and how changes in society impact on life, learning and work. Areas of least confidence focused on the ability to make effective career and life decisions and planning and managing life, learning and work. In relation to programme provision students welcomed opportunities to engage in extra curricular activities but demanded more focused and relevant work experience opportunities.

### **Introduction**

Graduate employment is an important issue for UK universities and all our higher education institutions Mason (2006). Every university is challenged by their position in the league tables and many are taking action to improve this. The measures taken by universities include;

- enhancing teaching and learning to improve the employability of their students,
- investing in skills/employability development roles to engage employers, (to increase the provision of work experience placements and projects)
- establishing internship programmes that increase the number of work opportunities available on graduation.

All of these aim to provide students with an advantage when competing with fellow graduates for the often limited and competitive opportunities available. Although this research is located within the same context it attempts to consider supporting graduate

employability from a different angle; that of developing career management skills. Employability in and of itself attracts a range of definitions; within this project we are using that defined by Hillage and Pollard (1998) as the capacity to gain, keep and obtain new employment as required.

This paper offers an introduction into the Blueprint for Careers, career management skills and how these have been used in one UK University. The project facilitates students to self-assess their career management competencies and academics to audit where and how their programmes can enhance student employability.

## **Background and context**

UK Universities are required to undertake an annual Destinations of Leavers Survey, (DLHE), which reports on the employment destinations of leavers 6 months after graduation. This assesses the numbers of graduates in work and study, those in graduate level jobs and their average salaries; this all contributes to the universities position in the league tables. These are published and reported on widely in the media. Prospective students are encouraged to use these league tables to help them to choose their university.

The new fees regime in England from September 2012 requires students to pay between £6000 and £9000 for each year of their degree, contributing to debts of £18,000+ by the time students' graduate. It is felt that potential students are now using employability as a university selection criteria and will be increasingly drawn to those universities that have a better position in the employment league table and report better salaries for their graduates (Norton, 2008).

The University of Derby has always had a strong reputation for vocational degrees across many sectors, including Art and Design, Business, Computing and Law, Hospitality, Event Management and Spa, Sport, Technology and Engineering, Education, Health and Science. It also has a history of embedding career management and employability into its programmes. In 2011-12, a new Learning and Teaching Enhancement Department was created (LEI) to strengthen the support to academic staff to develop innovative teaching and learning. Employability is seen to be central to this development.

The Career Development Centre (CDC) is located within LEI and provides a range of services to support students in making decisions and managing graduate transitions. They have also been charged with improving the employment outcomes for graduates. In response to this, in September 2011, a proposal for a research project was put forward to the university research committee to test out the Blueprint for Careers (2011). It was felt that this framework could support the propositions set out in the Teaching and Learning strategy that all our students could expect to be engaged with the external environment, globally informed, with life skills, and ready for employment when they finish university.

Derby has 14,640 UG students, 2,955 PG students and students from a very diverse range of backgrounds. 50% of students are located within a 50 mile radius of Derby, the other half of the student population are drawn to Derby from across the UK, and there are increasing numbers of EU and International students, currently around 1500.

In terms of age profile, 32% are under 21, 23% are 21-24, 12% are 25-29, and 32% are 30+. 59% of graduates are working in the local area 6 months after graduation. 67% of students have significant work experience prior to coming to university (University of Derby 2012).

The University of Derby is considered to be a widening participation university, offering access to a wider section of the population than many others. Consequently a good proportion of students are the first in their family to attend a university and aspire to a professional career. However the evidence suggests that working class students are disadvantaged in the graduate labour market because they lack the economic, social and cultural capital possessed by their middle class peers (Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). This social background can have an impact on aspirations, self-confidence and self-efficacy required to compete effectively in the graduate job market. Academic colleagues often comment on the lack of confidence displayed by our students, who have a very wide range of aims in relation to career and life goals. For some, just getting to and surviving university is a huge achievement in itself.

The Career Development Centre at the University sees nearly 2000 individual students per year and has contact with more through teaching sessions within taught modules. Increasingly it is recognised that employability and future career/life choices must be part of the curriculum from year 1, if students on graduation are to leave university with self confidence, self efficacy, a clear idea of who they are, their values, strengths and motivations, be able to articulate this and secure graduate level work. It was for this reason that the Blueprint for Careers was felt to be an appropriate framework to test out with our student body.

### **The Blueprint for Careers**

Career management skills need to be considered as an extension to employability skills. The term 'career managements skills' is used to define the skills, attributes, attitudes and knowledge required to effectively manage their career within dynamic and flexible labour markets (Hooley, Watts, Sultana and Neary, forthcoming). This lends itself both to the particular needs of university students and to the current challenging employment market they face.

The concept of a career management framework has been evolving through a number of iterations since the late 1980s where the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee in the US developed the first Blueprint; the National Career Development Guidelines (1989). This was then adapted for Canada in 1996 (National Life/work Centre n.d) to become the Blueprint for Life/Work Designs; closely followed by the Australian Blueprint (McMahon, Patton, and Tatham 2003). Hooley et al (forthcoming) provide an in-depth analysis of the various iterations and specifically the evolution of the Blueprint as a learning paradigm. The framework has evolved to encompass a more inclusive relationship between work and life; by presenting the competencies enabling this to happen. During 2010/2011 The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) trialled the Australian Blueprint with a range of learning providers including universities (LSIS, 2011b). This research contributed to the formulation of a Blueprint for England the Blueprint for Careers (2011a). This current research utilised this new framework.

The Blueprint offers a framework that aims to support individuals to effectively manage their career, learning and work through defined career learning competencies. Three headings; understanding and developing myself; exploring life, learning and work and developing and managing my career define the framework. These are underpinned by 11 career learning competencies; together these make up the Blueprint. (See Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1. The Blueprint for Careers**

<b>The Blueprint for Careers</b>
<b><i>Understanding and developing myself</i></b>
1. I know who I am and what I am good at
2. I interact confidently and effectively with others
3. I change, develop and adapt throughout my life
<b><i>Exploring life, learning and work</i></b>
4. I learn throughout my life
5. I find and utilise information and the support of others
6. I understand how changes in society, politics and the economy relate to my life, learning and work
7. I understand how life, learning and work roles change over time
<b><i>Developing and managing my career</i></b>
8. I make effective decisions relating to my life, learning and work
9. I find, create and keep work
10. I maintain a balance in my life, learning and work that is right for me
11. I plan, develop and manage my life, learning and work

The Blueprint for Careers (LSIS, 2011a) provided an opportunity to investigate how using career management competencies might raise awareness and support the acquisition of skills to support life, learning and work with graduates and programme leaders within the university.

## **The Methodology**

Funding to undertake the project was sought from the University Student Experience Strategy group, the focus of which is to test initiatives that could be adopted by the university to enhance students' academic careers. Faculty members of the committee were asked to identify 2 programmes from within their Faculties to participate in the project; a total of 8 could be involved.

The research project adopted a multi-layered approach which aimed to capture data from students on both their confidence in their own career management competencies and the extent to which they felt supported to develop these through their programme of study. A key element of the project was the involvement of students, to facilitate this the project sought to recruit and employ 2 students from each of the programmes to support and manage the wider student engagement with the project.

### *Student researchers*

The 'student' researchers acted as a focal point for the research in terms of promoting the research to their peers, being a champion of career management and feeding back

the outcomes of the research to their programme. The rationale for selecting this approach was located in a desire for the students to be at the centre of the work and to redistribute the power between the researcher and the students (Atweh and Leone 1995). Additionally it was felt that students might be more willing to contribute to a project facilitated by peers rather than academic staff.

Job descriptions and person specifications for the student researchers were drafted and sent out to the academic partners, with a request they identify students who they thought would become competent researchers, and have capacity to undertake the work. A total of 10 students were initially recruited and employed for the project, 6 had been identified by the academic partners and 4 through advertising; 9 finally contributed as 1 left soon after the project commenced. The programmes they came from included Biology and Zoology, Early Childhood Studies, Business Management, Accounting and Finance, Business Management and Events Management.

To support the students in the task a training programme was devised which provided an input on research skills, methodology, ethics, career management skills and opportunities to define approaches for encouraging their peers to contribute to the project. A project blog was established through which they could share their experiences and ask for support and ideas from each other in growing the awareness of the on-line questionnaire and encouraging students to complete it.

Each programme area was asked to support the students in giving them access to student groups to provide opportunities to promote the on-line questionnaire. This did not happen to the same extent in all areas resulting in a significant impact on the numbers of students completing the on-line questionnaire. In total 157 students contributed to the survey. It is difficult to assess the response rate overall as student researchers were unable to define the numbers of students in each of the lectures they attended to promote the research.

The questionnaire data was analysed using Excel, this allowed the mean to be calculated for the responses to each question by programme and for the group overall. Focus groups were arranged by the student researchers with their peer group to gain a deeper understanding of the responses and to provide triangulation of the data. This helped in assessing the relevance of the responses as well as identifying opportunities for programme developments. The narrative elements of the questionnaire were also collated and analysed to identify themes in relation to student expectations from their programme and recommendations for enhancements.

## **Findings and discussion**

Responses to the questionnaire were received predominantly from four programme areas; Biology, Zoology, Events Management and Business. Biology and Zoology represented over 57% of the responses overall. This paper will present some indicative findings for the overall group rather than those specific to the academic disciplines but will identify any variances that may be of interest. Across academic disciplines students undertaking Events Management were generally more positive about both their career management skills and the support of the programme compared to other programmes; Zoology was least positive.

Students across all programmes generally felt less confident about how their programme was supporting them and more confident in their own abilities in developing the pertinent career management skills. This may be because they were able to identify examples from their own experience of where they were able to demonstrate competence but struggled with defining how the programme supported them.

### **Students' perception of areas of strength**

Areas of **most personal confidence** identified by all students focused on

- Their ability to change, develop and adapt through life; and
- Their ability to understand how changes in society, politics and the economy relate to life, learning and work

For many these selections reflected that for students their lives had changed through coming to university and were able to articulate examples when they had to adapt and change. There was a sense of self awareness of students consciously adopting ways of working to help them develop skills which they felt would be transferable.

*“I try out various revision methods in order to understand which may suit my learning ability”*

*“ The ability to skim read many long texts and extract that which is important is also a skills I have gained and develop”*

Areas of **least personal confidence** focused on

- Their ability to make effective decisions relating to life, learning and work; and
- Knowing who you are and what you are good at

These choices are interesting as they suggest that students are lacking in self awareness which consequently could also relate to their selection of decision making as an issue. Law and Watts (1977) identify self awareness and decision making as two of the main components of career planning the others being opportunity awareness and transition awareness. Students generally struggled in identifying opportunities within their life that evidenced these two areas of competence. Decision making is a key employability skill, built on the ability to access and utilise information and then take action. Responses to the competence ‘I am able to find and utilise information and support from others when I need it’ was also generally lower than some of the other competencies explored.

In relation to how the programme supports students they tended to respond more negatively, although there was a recognition that programmes attempted to support them in developing employability skills.

Areas of **most confidence in their programme** of study focused on

- Support to change, develop and adapt through life; and
- Recognising the role and importance of lifelong learning

There is some synergy here in relation to personal confidence; as in both instances being able to change, develop and adapt was the competency attracting the greatest confidence levels. The recognition of lifelong learning would also suggest a recognition that individuals will need to continue to learn throughout life and that university is only one part of this. It could be argued that both these competences

reflected more recent experiences and specifically their transition to managing their university life.

Areas of **least confidence in their programme** of study focused on

- Find, create and keep work
- Apportion and maintain a balance of life learning and work

The issue of work was a key theme identified throughout the narrative responses. Students were very conscious and aware of the issues of graduate unemployment. The need to develop a robust set of employability skills was considered by students in many of their responses.

*“ The University should offer every student a few months of practice in a workplace depending on their course”*

The selection of competence around work life balance reflects what for many is a challenging environment where students are often balancing a number of commitments. It is not unusual for full time students to also work full time hours. In addition many of the students are mature students and are balancing their studies with family life.

### **Career management support offered by programmes**

All programmes offer personal development support within their programmes; usually in the form of Personal Development Planning (PDP). In addition to this dedicated careers related module employer activities and work placements may be offered; this will be defined as appropriate to each programme. The Blueprint offered programme leaders an opportunity to receive feedback from students on the extent to which they were meeting student’s needs and to identify omissions.

Students were able to identify a range of support activities provided by the programme. These tended to focus on activities to support the development of interpersonal skills, careers awareness, extra curricular and work specific skills.

**Interpersonal skills** - students recognised and valued all opportunities offered to them which allowed them to practice develop and apply interpersonal skills within their programme. Opportunities to work as a team, with new people, public speaking and presentations were identified as supporting them to enhance skills to understand and develop themselves.

*“ Group presentations means I work as part of a team, often with people I wouldn’t normally work with and also enhances my ability to communicate information”*

**Careers awareness** – all opportunities to engage with employers, previous students and to learn about the range of career opportunities within the sector were welcomed. Students access this both through provision delivered by the Career Development Centre service and that organised directly by the programme. These opportunities supported students in making the links between academic skills and transition into the workplace.

*“I would like to engage more in career development planning to help me understand even further what I am good at”*

*“Careers based module helps me to define who I am in a professional sense”*

However, not all students recognised the need to broaden out from the academic discipline and resented the focus on personal development and the dilution of their studies, hence the title of the study.

**Extra curricular** – many students used opportunities provided by the university to develop their career management skills. Peer mentoring, volunteering and work placements were all seen to add value to the programme of study.

*“ I take part in peer mentoring scheme where I can be a mentee of someone who is professional and has done the same degree as mine”*

Students generally wanted more of these opportunities, but often not at the expense of discipline based modules.

**Work related skills** - opportunities to develop skills that would be used in the workplace such as lab skills, technology skills, research, volunteering and ‘real practical events’ supported students in applying their academic disciplines in practice. Students felt this was an area which needed to be expanded further and that the relationship between their academic programme and practice could be better supported.

*“ More practical work and placement in an environment which more accurately represents the working life than sitting in a lecture theatre does.”*

### **What else do students want?**

Students generally recognise, value and appreciate opportunities that allow them to combine their academic study with real work related opportunities. Many felt there was too much emphasis on volunteering and part time work rather than supporting students to gain relevant paid work experience.

Students wanted more interpersonal skills development and careers awareness opportunities. Specific topic identified as a response to the career management questions included; networking opportunities with professionals from industry, help with finding work placements and internships, global issues relating to academic disciplines and presentations from a variety of previous students not just the highly successful.

However, an issue identified was the challenge in building in these activities within an already demanding schedule at times when students can access them. The greatest criticism focused on timetabling. This tends to be a universal issue and it is unlikely that all students will get what they want when they want it.

### **What happens next?**

Feedback of findings to academic colleagues prompted some useful discussions about the Blueprint framework and how it can be used with students. There is agreement that it is a useful framework within which to enable students to locate themselves and their personal development needs. It explains to students why personal development is important and why they should engage with the opportunities an HE experience can provide.

It has also been recognised that it is a broad conceptual framework that can encompass the wide diversity of students. What might be important personal career development for a student on Events Management may not be the same as for Biology. Decision making may be an issue for Zoology students but not so much for Biology students.

The Career Development Centre (CDC) is working on a diagnostic questionnaire for students that takes each competence and enables students to self assess their degree of confidence with each one and with referral to sources of advice and help.

The Blueprint for Careers will be used as a part of the training being rolled out to personal tutors so they can better understand career management competences and issues and locate their help within this paradigm. The CDC will also use the framework to badge career learning resources to better explain their value to students and academics.

Hooley, et al (forthcoming) identify that an issue for the adoption of Blueprints of this type is the lack of empirical evidence of impact. This project is attempting to establish in a small way the evidence base underpinning the use of a career management blueprint. This next stage will aim to support academic staff to adopt the Blueprint as a theoretical framework to teach students about career management competencies. The Careers Development Centre is continuing to have meaningful conversations with academics about this.

## **Conclusion**

Achieving global graduate competence is not just about attaining qualifications and excelling in a knowledge-based or professional capacity; it is also about holistic development including outlook, values and character – experiential learning is vital. The university seeks to develop students who are confident and creative, ambitious and entrepreneurial in their outlook on their life and study and see their experience in higher education as part of their lifelong career journey.

Traditional career development practices have focused largely on information acquisition and job search. The assumption has been that with access to appropriate information, and guidance, where necessary, people will be able to choose the right occupation for themselves: then they simply acquire the appropriate education and training and, with job search skills, find the right job. The reality is that even with good information and job search skills, if a person expects to fail, has poor communication and teamwork skills, is unwilling to embrace change and opportunity, commit to lifelong learning and innovation they will probably not keep a job long, even if they are fortunate enough to secure one. The Blueprint addresses how personal and career development works for an individual and develops a sense of ownership of career progression. By focusing on the individual it can raise aspirations and provide a framework for personal /career development planning, enabling the potential graduate to be positive and forward thinking and develop resilience to withstand the vagaries of the graduate labour market.

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