



UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF JOINT HONOURS GRADUATES: HOW CAN EDUCATORS BEST ENABLE STUDENT SUCCESS?

Louise Pigden

University of Derby, United Kingdom

Combined or joint honours degrees represent 10% of all UK undergraduates – 50,000 out of 500,000¹ currently enrolled on all honours degrees. This significant and special way of learning therefore warrants scrutiny. This type of degree facilitates students combining the study of two subjects to honours level, with modules delivered from two academic disciplines. The large proportion of students on such degrees across universities in England and Wales means that debate is needed as to the intrinsic value of such degrees especially in relation to graduate employability and career opportunities. This paper examines the lived experiences of joint honours graduates, evaluating the impact that studying joint honours had on their careers, and whether they were well prepared for graduate roles. We draw out themes and characteristics that will assist educators in supporting their students and enabling their future success.

Keywords: Joint honours, Graduates, Employability, Careers.

1. Introduction

The study of two subjects at university, while the norm in Scotland and Northern Ireland, is a minority activity in England and Wales where single honours degrees dominate. Notwithstanding that, nationally 10% of all undergraduates study joint honours², and at some universities the proportion is considerably higher³. Therefore this substantial body of students should command commensurate scrutiny in the literature regarding their experience and outcomes, but surprisingly this seems not to be the case. Beyond a handful of newspaper articles⁴ some chat in online social media platforms⁵ and a small number of

¹ UCAS, (2015). Applicants and Acceptances by Groups of Students, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resource-4>> [Accessed 3 February 2016]

² UCAS, (2016). Course search tool, [online]. Available at <<http://search.ucas.com/>> [Accessed 22 February 2016]

³ UCAS, (2016). Applications and acceptances for types of higher education course- 2015, [online]. Available at <<https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resource-5>> [Accessed 22 February 2016]

⁴ Sabur, R., (2013). 'Joint honours degrees: are two subjects better than one?' [online]. Available at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/clearing/10226371/Joint-honours-degrees-are-two-subjects-better-than-one.html>> [Accessed on 22 February 2016]

⁵ The Student Room, (2016). Available at: <http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/search-beta/?tsr-search-query=joint+honours> [Accessed 24 July 2016]

academic papers⁶, there is very little in the literature, peer reviewed or informal, which seeks to explain, understand and much less challenge this particular mode of study. Can we be sure, or even reasonably certain, that joint honours students are well served by their universities: enjoying enriching educational experiences, engaging with broadening and stimulating extra and co-curricular activities, and graduating feeling confident and purposeful as they pursue careers or further study?

Some tensions around the student experience are fairly obvious - students studying a single honours degree can reasonably expect a coherent and managed holistic student experience more so, in some respects, than those studying joint honours. For example, in a single honours degree the aim will be to optimize the timetable across the entire week, with avoidance of clashes between core modules and most optional modules. In a joint honours degree there are necessarily likely to be clashes, bunching of classes and a reduction in the choice of optional modules. Extra and co-curricular activities for single honours students will be relatively well communicated and will be designed to fit around the scheduled teaching slots. For joint honours students, there is the potential to miss out on such messages, or for students to feel some messages are not meant for them, and the activities may well clash with their other subject's core teaching, meaning students can miss out on these enrichment opportunities.

A consequence of the increasing marketization of higher education in England and Wales, including the transference of tuition fee debt from state to student, is that universities are increasingly challenged by students to provide value for money, and for most students this includes an expectation that they will be well prepared to access graduate careers upon completing their degree. Universities' positions in the various league tables usually include their scores for levels of graduate employment taken from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, and this is an area about which parents will commonly ask at open days: will my son or daughter get a good job if they study this degree? The question applies equally to joint as well as single honours degrees, and so it is vital that the support for joint honours students enables them to thrive on a level playing field and compete effectively post-graduation with their single honours peers. The purpose of this study is to survey joint honours alumni of one university, to establish their experiences on the degree and whether they felt well prepared for the graduate jobs market. The intention is to add to the modest body of literature on this subject and so assist academics and professional managers in providing appropriate structures and support so that joint honours students achieve their best and leave university work-ready.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The data currently in the public domain from the DLHE survey does not permit a full analysis of joint honours students – the students' responses are divided between the two subject areas in which they have studied and so get 'lost'. It is not possible to establish whether a joint honours English and History graduate is more, less, or equally likely to be in a graduate role, than those who have studied the respective single honours degrees.

Similarly, the National Student Survey (NSS) attributes joint honours students' responses into their two subject areas, again losing the wherewithal to reflect on the whole experience of a student studying two subjects. Since most the questions relate to degree, the NSS poses a dilemma for a joint honours student – how do they respond if they have experienced markedly different standards between their two subjects in teaching, assessment, feedback, support, organization and management, and learning resources? Any such differences in the two subjects may result in students feeling their holistic academic performance and personal development has been hampered, and their overall satisfaction with the quality of the degree is dampened, even if half of it is truly outstanding.

University leaders are rightly keen to share excellent practice within their institutions and drive up performance in weaker subject areas. However without an all-encompassing appreciation of the joint honours student experience universities may inadvertently fail to prioritize true parity of experience

⁶ Canning, J., (2005). 'Disciplinary: a barrier to quality assurance? The UK experience of area studies'. *Quality in Higher Education*, Volume 11, Issue 1, pp 37-46.

across subject areas. Unfortunately such differences will be experienced sharply by joint honours students and can affect their sense of a coherent and high quality degree. Therefore an evidence base is required that describes the students' perception of the support and services they have received, such that universities might be encouraged to take on the challenge of ensuring the students and their experience is not under the radar.

This study will focus on graduate employability, although other aspects of the student experience might just as fruitfully be critiqued, such as personal tutor support or the appropriateness of the various systems and protocols around student communications. The enquiry will be limited to graduates of a single university, but from a cross-section of subjects and years of graduation.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to establish 1) the graduates' perceptions of joint honours degrees before coming on to the degree, 2) whether they felt they developed sufficient skills around career planning and development during the degree, 3) whether they were prepared adequately for seeking graduate jobs following graduation.

The intention is that this study will increase awareness and stimulate debate, and may lead to improvements, if needed, in the services provided and, in particular, encourage a joined up view of the joint honours student experience. It is vital that students neither miss out on crucial interventions and enrichments nor get double helpings, which may also be the case, and can lead students to feel that their holistic needs have not been understood and met.

1.3 Importance of the Study

1. The joint honours degree can be a less tightly managed student experience and a holistic view must be taken to ensure that the students receive their university's full package of support and opportunities.
2. The data and associated critique currently in the public domain does not extend deeply enough into joint honours degrees, and certainly not to the same extent as single honours degrees.

1.4 Methodology

The approach taken in this study is qualitative in nature in that individual experiences are examined and analyzed, rather than the statistical analysis of a large dataset. A survey was used, which may be considered more usually a quantitative tool, but the use of open-ended questions ensured a qualitative function.⁷

2. The survey

2.1 Research Questions

- 1) What were the graduates' perceptions of their joint honours degree before coming to university?
- 2) Did the graduates feel they developed sufficient career planning and development skills during their degree?
- 3) Did the graduates feel they were adequately prepared for seeking graduate jobs following graduation?

⁷ Westbrook, L., (1990). 'Evaluating Reference: An Introductory Overview of Qualitative Methods', Reference Services Review, Vol. 18 Iss 1 pp. 73 - 78

2.2 Delimitations

This study is limited to joint honours graduates of one English university, who graduated between 2008 and 2014. As such, generalization across the sector is necessarily avoided, though this will be the focus of future work (see section 4). Secondly, the sample size was small as explained in section 2.5 around the data collection, and so generalization across all joint honours graduates of this university is not the intention of the study. However some themes emerged that were dominant in the responses, and so some tentative generalization might be justified.

This is a qualitative research study utilizing phenomenology to examine the experiences of joint honours students. Therefore local, idiosyncratic findings are accepted without any claim of statistical significance. Phenomenology is also a useful methodology for describing rather than explaining subjective experience⁸. Given the limited sample size and non-exhaustive nature of the survey, this approach is appropriate for the aims of this study.

2.3 Limitations

A limitation of the study is the small sample size, but more-so that the graduates volunteered for the study by responding to a previous request for information about their whereabouts and current job role (see section 2.5 on data collection). Therefore this group of responders had already identified themselves as wishing to engage with the university about their careers. It might be surmised that these graduates felt overly passionate or analytical about their current careers, relative to the overall graduate population, and that could skew their responses to the survey questions. Replication of this study could be performed to assess the reliability of its findings, and add to the available data regarding joint honours students.

2.4 Participants

During April 2015 an unsolicited marketing email was sent to 2701 joint honours alumni of one university who graduated during 2007 to 2014. The main intention behind the contact was to find out what careers the graduates had worked their way into, often several years after graduation. However the intention was also to form potential relationships that might lead to further activities, for example generating case studies or profiles for marketing purposes, or inviting alumni to come onto campus to talk to current undergraduates.

Of the 2701 emails sent, 207 failed to be delivered, because of a non-recognizable email address, presumably because the students changed their personal email addresses at some point post-graduation. From the 2494 emails that were delivered, there were 108 replies: 76 responded to confirm that having a joint honours degree had helped their career, 2 said that it had hindered their career, and 30 said that having a joint honours degree had been irrelevant to their career development.

The second contact, and the focus of this study, was made during May 2016 when a letter inviting graduates to participate in a research study was sent to the 108 respondents from the first round of emails. The rationale for selecting these potential participants was that the study was very short: 6 weeks from start to finish since the project was part of this university's 'Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme' (URSS), and so the data collection was led by a time-constrained student researcher. Therefore a good response rate was important as there was insufficient time to conduct a broader study.

2.5 Data Collection

Data was collected during May 2016. The participants were sent a survey to complete, and advised they could respond via email or via a phone call. Everyone who responded did so via email, presumably for

⁸ Paul, J., Kleinhammer-Trammill, J., & Fowler, K. (2006). *Qualitative research methods in special education*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing Company

their own efficiency and convenience. 12 out of 108 potential participants completed the survey (annex 1) and their responses are presented and analyzed in section 2.6. It is interesting to note that even though the dataset spanned graduates from 2007 to 2014, those that participated came exclusively from 2007 (2), 2008 (3), 2009 (3), 2010 (4), i.e. no 'recent' graduates responded to the survey. It may be suggested this is because it takes several years to develop an established career, such that one might feel qualified to participate in a survey about one's degree and its impact on career development.

The survey tool comprised 13 questions, some open and some closed, designed to elicit a feel for the experience on the degree and the usefulness of the support received in terms of subsequently achieving graduate roles (annex 2).

2.6 Responses

The graduates were all asked the same 13 questions, and their responses are presented next.

1. Were you aware of joint honours degrees before applying to university?

Yes: five No: seven

For the graduates who were aware of joint honours degrees before applying, one learned about them at a university open day, one from looking through university brochures and one via an older friend who had studied joint honours at another university. Two of the students who said 'no' qualified their responses by adding that they subsequently received admissions advice that their chosen degree was only available as joint honours, but most responded to confirm they knew nothing of joint honours before applying to university.

That the majority were unaware of joint honours degrees before applying to university is probably a reflection that this is a minority modality compared with single honours, and therefore less well known and understood by those guiding university applicants, namely careers advisors, heads of sixth form or further education colleges, and parents. Special note should therefore be taken of the need to counsel students at the point of application to be assured that they are enrolling on the degree that matches their aspirations, aptitudes and abilities.

2. Did you have any pre-conceptions of the degree?

Of the students who had pre-conceptions, two said this was based on what had been presented at open days and in the prospectus, underlining the importance of accuracy and attention to detail in publicity material, together with suitable training for staff and students who are advising at open days. Furthermore, one respondent felt the degree would be tailored to their needs, and so managing realistic expectations amongst new students is crucial in terms of helping them transition positively onto their university degree.

Another respondent felt the degree would be like continuing with A-Levels, in the sense that more than one subject would continue to be studied, whilst another felt the degree would be heavy on self-directed learning and the experience would be 'what I made of it'. One graduate assumed they would become expert in their subjects, that the degree would be ideal career preparation by mixing two subjects. These positive and aspirational responses, for assumptions made pre-enrollment onto the degree are encouraging.

Six respondents said they had no pre-conceptions of the degree before embarking on their programme of study. This indicates a level of open mindedness in half of the respondents, a helpful characteristic in the pursuit of higher education.

3. Were you made fully aware of all that was available to you when studying?

All but one of the graduates responded broadly positively: one commented that they had worked as a student ambassador at open days which gave them good awareness and insight, while one graduate commented that they had some regrets that with hindsight they did not access all the resources available, although they knew at the time what was available.

One respondent felt that as a joint honours student they received less guidance than single honours students and another commented that while they received advice about the degree they were unsure about broader opportunities. This points to a slight sense of unease amongst some of the respondents that they may have been missing out, but could not pinpoint exactly how – ‘there are...unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know’⁹.

4. Do you feel you got the most out of your degree?

The vast majority responded positively. In particular one commented that they appreciated having been able to ‘try out’ a subject before dropping it to concentrate on their other two subjects. This kind of flexibility in the design of joint honours degrees is certainly a differentiator from single honours, however most graduates will remain on ‘true’ joint honours, studying equally from their two subjects, rather than choosing to major/minor or drop one subject to study single honours. So this perceived benefit would go unutilized by most students.

One graduate commented that they had not extracted the most out of their degree, but took personal responsibility for that, acknowledging that in hindsight they should have committed to extra-curricular activities such as student politics, journalism or blogging. Another said that they were ‘young at the time and would do things differently now’. Such comments indicate the need to help undergraduates early in their degree to recognize and grasp the full range of opportunities available to them; perhaps alumni have a role to play here as an authentic witness as to the importance of a broad higher education, not just academic achievement.

One commented that after four years at a further education college, they had arrived at university somewhat jaded and therefore did not commit fully to their degree, which they later came to regret. This is a slightly different issue, and points to the need for students to reflect on the best time in life to go to university, which for some may not be directly after A-Levels or other Level 3 study, but instead following a break to travel or work. They will then have recharged their cognitive batteries and also consolidated their decision-making around the best degree that will support career planning. The importance of pre-enrolment advice is highlighted by this issue.

A somewhat regretful comment was made from a graduate who completed at the height of the recession in 2008, and who therefore felt their time, effort and money spent at university had been wasted. Even eight years following graduation this sense seemed not to have dissipated within this individual, although others in that year group who responded to the survey seemed to have flourished eventually, presumably via the application of unwavering determination and a refusal to give up on their career dreams. The same circumstances will clearly affect individuals differently¹⁰.

Lastly, one graduate commented that they wished they had undertaken a placement year or internship but had not realized these opportunities were available until it was too late. This is a somewhat disappointing response, given the data which shows¹¹ that students taking a placement year achieve proportionately better in achieving Firsts and 2.1’s, and also in securing the much coveted graduate positions in a competitive market.

5. Do you feel you were offered the right amount of support to prepare you for a job during and after your degree?

The responses were largely negative with eight out of twelve responding ‘no’, and only four out of twelve responding positively. One respondent said they felt very much alone and sought out volunteering to facilitate entry into the teaching profession without knowing what support the university could have provided. A comment was made: ‘definitely not’ - apart from one encouraging tutor, this graduate had no

⁹ Rumsfeld, D., (2002). DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers, [online]. Available at < <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636> > [Accessed on 24 July 2016]

¹⁰ Brown, D., (2002). Career Choice and Development. John Wiley and Sons, San Francisco

¹¹ Brooks, R., Youngson, P.L., (2016). ‘Undergraduate work placements: an analysis of the effects on career progression.’ *Studies in Higher Education*. Sep2016, Vol. 41 Issue 9, p1563-1578. 16p. 12 Charts.

idea who to go to for advice and guidance. One graduate commented that they found the careers service could not help them break into the marketing industry – they was ‘embarrassed and scared’ to take six months following graduation to get into the profession.

These are challenging and concerning responses. The replies seem to generally point to a lack of awareness of the comprehensive support offered, with the exception of the comment about not being supported to break into marketing. What is not clear, is whether these graduates did not believe there was support specific to their needs as joint honours students, or whether they felt the support was more generally lacking, or whether they failed to access support entirely. This would require a follow up investigation to establish more firmly the reasons for the negativity expressed.

6. What was your experience whilst on the joint honours degree?

This open question elicited varied but generally positive responses. One said their experience had been good, but only because they were such an independent learner, and another commented that they felt relatively unsupported since their combination of two subjects was so diverse academically. These slightly mixed responses indicate a degree of inconsistency in the support for the educational progression for joint honours students, necessitating self-sufficiency.

One graduate said the experience was challenging and interesting and developed their decision making and negotiation skills. Whilst ostensibly a positive comment, it could nonetheless be inferred that the need to develop negotiation skills on a degree does hint towards some tension in the overall, holistic degree experience. This student was having to find ways to bridge between the two academic disciplines, rather than the university fully meshing both parts as one whole.

One graduate commented that they really enjoyed the flexibility of the degree and moved to major in the subject that they initially liked less. Another said they enjoyed not being ‘tied’ to one subject and deployed their minor subject as an ‘escape valve’ from their major subject. Another valued the flexibility of swapping modules and even a whole subject, and found that straightforward to achieve. These are all positive reactions to the benefits that ought to be inherent in studying joint honours degrees. However skillful academic advising is required in order that students do benefit appropriately from the flexibility. When good advice is not received, students may only survive rather than thrive, and there is the risk of a related impact on self-confidence and aspiration that will affect the students’ drive and ability to secure graduate roles upon completion of their degree. Secondly, students can make poor choices if they are ill informed of the consequences of module or subject changes, for example missing pre-requisite modules in later years, or missing curriculum vital to future postgraduate or career intentions.

Two graduates noted an exceptionally good experience in one subject but poor in the other, due in part to their perceived poor attitudes of staff and other students, though exactly what the attitudinal issues were is unclear. Another comment about studying two subjects was that sometimes it was difficult to switch focus between the subjects, and it was expensive to buy two sets of books, however that graduate loved the degree and would recommend it nonetheless. These two comments illustrate common issues that arise in studying two subjects. The first, around a differential experience between the subjects, is difficult for universities to tease out of the available data, since both NSS and DLHE cannot be interrogated for the individual subjects comprising a joint honours degree. The second comment is an increasingly acute issue, given the need to be transparent about degree costs, to be fair to all students, and also to provide value for money.

7. Once you graduated were you sufficiently prepared to go into the jobs market?

The majority answered negatively here. Two graduates who completed at the peak of the recession in 2008 commented that the university might have done more to manage expectations and help them to secure relevant work. This is an interesting perspective and indicates the compromise universities must make to establish a realistic expectation amongst their graduating students, whilst nonetheless instilling within them a confidence and drive to believe they can achieve their career ambitions.

Another commented that they did not formulate a career plan ahead of graduating, but merely started ‘randomly’ applying for graduate jobs. One respondent said in response to whether they were sufficiently

prepared, ‘no, not at all!’ - they felt highly underprepared for how hard it was going to be to secure relevant graduate employment – only when they had secured some work experience, just basic office administration, did employers start to take their applications seriously. These are sobering comments from graduates who went on to achieve career success, and who otherwise enjoyed their university experience.

Another respondent felt underprepared and felt the university should have encouraged volunteering and other work experience opportunities to put students in the path of potential employers and improve their curriculum vitae. One respondent said they were unemployed for such a long time after graduating that in desperation they started their own company. Another commented that after two years of failing to secure work, it was their part-time office work, secured through the university, which eventually led to employment, rather than the degree per se.

Of those that responded positively, one acknowledged that although a degree does not equate to real-world work experience, nonetheless their degree helped them to secure a graduate job. Another commented that they were under prepared by personal choice: they intentionally concentrated on enjoying the process of getting a degree, at the expense of career planning. One respondent said that it was their own personal career research that was most effective rather than the generalist advice received from the careers service. Another said it was their pre-degree work experience, rather than their degree, that led to employment.

These responses highlight the individualistic nature of career research and planning, and the range of barriers and challenges different students will encounter, including those of their own perception or making. Careers support will need to be personalized and contextualized to each student in order to be well received and therefore effective.

8. Did you go into further study after your degree?

A slight majority responded ‘no’ - one due to financial constraints, and another because their paid work took up too much time and energy, indicating an assumption that any postgraduate study would be part-time while continuing with work. However two respondents commented that they still intended to return to postgraduate study.

Of those that responded ‘yes’ five said that the postgraduate degree was part of or required by their current job, and this is a vital message to build into careers advice at undergraduate level – namely that increasingly graduate professions will expect a postgraduate qualification, if not at the point of entry, then within the first five years. Whether the undergraduate and postgraduate degrees need to be in cognate discipline areas will vary with the profession.

9. Did you leave with enough skills and qualifications to pursue your chosen career path?

The majority of respondents said ‘yes’, and one commented that they nonetheless undertook further study to stand out from the crowd. Another said that on the ‘skills front’, learning to concentrate and focus their efforts to meet deadlines has proved invaluable. Those that said ‘no’ mapped onto those in Q8 who undertook further study as part of or required by their current role.

The unsolicited extra feedback around concentration, focus and time management indicates an area that could usefully be analyzed further, in order to understand more broadly from the graduates’ perspectives exactly what skills, learned during the joint honours degree, were later deployed and useful or essential in a graduate job role.

10. Has the significance of a joint honours degree been registered when applying for jobs? Has it been a positive or negative experience?

One respondent commented that employers, outside of ‘the professions’, do not seem to look at the subjects studied, only that the job applicant is educated to degree level. Another responded to confirm that their joint honours degree had never been commented upon by employers. This accords with research

published by the CBI that indicates that employers value attitude and aptitude ahead of any particular degree subject.¹²

One graduate commented that their diverse combination (Sport & Exercise Science and Marketing) had attracted curiosity from some employers and the student was asked to explain why they had studied these particular subjects. This is a crucial point: all graduates are likely to be asked why they studied a particular subject at degree level, and joint honours students must additionally explain why they studied two subjects instead of the more usual one. Furthermore some subject combinations may be perceived as ‘unusual’ by some prospective employers, so part of the preparedness for work must always include the formation of a strong and confident response to this sort of question.

One graduate said that employers had been mainly positive about their degree, but that they were more interested in discussing the student’s volunteering and internship as these were the discriminators that set them apart from other job applicants, underlining the importance of extra and co-curricular activities in terms of graduate employability¹³. Another respondent said that their joint honours degree demonstrated flexibility and the ability to cultivate interests in different areas – positive characteristics for employers, and again pointing to the importance of transferable skills.

One responded to say they had been asked ‘why study Mathematics and Marketing’ but not ‘why joint honours’, again an interest in the subjects rather than joint honours per se. Another replied that their English Literature and Creative Writing degree helped to set them apart and elicited an interested response from employers. One respondent said that the reaction of employers was ‘very positive’, while another said that despite trying to explain in job applications the nature of a joint honours degree, the employers had not seemed interested, only noting that they had a degree.

One respondent said that they felt self-conscious about having studied Geography and Accounting, even though it had been an advantage in some situations to demonstrate ability in economics and finance. For one job application this graduate left out mention of Accounting, even though no employer had previously indicated a negative view, as it betrayed their own anxieties. The root of this discomfort is difficult to pinpoint, but does emphasize the role universities must play in nurturing self-confidence and assuredness in their students.

Another graduate said that employers genuinely did not seem to place importance on whether the individual had a joint or a single honours degree, although from this student’s perspective it gave them the opportunity to tailor responses to job applications and interview questions to different parts of their degree, which had given them a broad base of knowledge and skills. Another said the employers did not seem to even notice that they had a joint honours degree.

This consistent set of responses indicates that employers are less interested in the degree title and content, and more concerned with how to differentiate graduates based on work experience, volunteering, sport or other activities that a student will have used as a vehicle to develop their self-confidence, maturity, interpersonal skills and general competence. Such characteristics also indicate a curiosity of nature that can also set graduates apart from one another.

11. Do you feel that the university could have done more either during or after graduating, to increase your chances of employability?

Three respondents said they felt there could have been more, or better advertised or communicated, careers support sessions and workshops, particularly emphasizing the need for personalized conversations, with one of the graduates confirming that they only discovered the careers service after

¹² CBI/Pearson (2015), Inspiring Growth: CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2015, [online] Available at <<http://news.cbi.org.uk/reports/education-and-skills-survey-2015/education-and-skills-survey-2015/>> [Accessed on 29 February 2016]

¹³ Clarke, M., (2016). ‘Addressing the soft skills crisis’, Strategic HR Review, Vol. 15 Iss: 3, pp.137 – 139. [online]. Available at <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/SHR-03-2016-0026>>. [Accessed on 24 July 2016]

graduating. This reinforces the observation made earlier around student engagement being dependent on their sense that the intervention is individualized to them and highly relevant¹⁴.

Another graduate specifically mentioned the need for more support for writing job applications, interviewing skills and internship opportunities, and that mentoring by postgraduates would have been ‘amazing’. This sort of support is certainly available, so reflecting on how to increase the take-up must include consideration of the methods of communication deployed, and also ensuring that students grasp the importance and impact of such support before they attempt to secure graduate employment.

Two respondents mentioned that mandatory volunteering or internships would have been highly beneficial. Another responded to say that it would have been helpful to have talks from local businesses and other ways to learn about the sort of jobs that were available and suitable. This feedback accords with the research around the importance of work experience¹⁵; employers are looking for graduates with customer awareness and business acumen, irrespective of or in addition to the degree that they have studied.

One graduate commented that more support was needed post-graduation as well as during the degree. Again, this support is already provided, but clearly the messages were not being received in a way that they were assimilated, understood and acted upon.

12. Have you succeeded in entering your chosen career path?

The majority responded positively. Of those who said ‘yes’, one made the observation that their colleagues seemed not to have relevant degrees, or not to have any degree at all, raising the issue of whether a ‘relevant’ degree was really needed for all ‘graduate’ roles. Of those that said ‘no’, two responded to say they were nonetheless happy in their alternative career. Two said they had not had a clear career path while at university or indeed thereafter, and instead grasped opportunities when they arose. One said they were still not quite there, but that was due to having started a family in the interim.

13. Is there anything else that you wish to add regarding either your experience of taking part in a joint honours degree or after graduation?

Not all respondents wished or felt they needed to add anything else, though one confirmed that ‘it was a really good degree’ and that they had enjoyed the experience and felt supported in the main. Another wanted to comment that joint honours students can potentially feel isolated but that because all staff seemed to know about joint honours so this was less of an issue than it might otherwise have been.

One respondent said that students generally need more personal support regarding their studies, progress and career planning. One respondent commented that joint honours provided them the space and flexibility to grow in themselves and also to adjust the degree as their passions and focus on the future crystalized out to provide clarity. Another graduate commented that not being part of a single honours cohort led to the development of their independence and individuality. One graduate said the pre-enrolment counselling would be helpful to test the rationale for a particular combination of subjects.

3. Implications

Although this was a small study and centred on one English university, there are nonetheless some salient points worthy of observation and to stimulate further debate. Generally the participants felt positively about their joint honours degrees, and while this may indicate a bias in the responses conversely, given

¹⁴ Greenbank, P., (2015). ‘Still focusing on the “essential 2:1”’: exploring student attitudes to extra-curricular activities’. *Education + Training*, Vol. 57 Iss: 2, pp.184 – 203. Available at <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/ET-06-2013-0087>> [Accessed on 24 July 2016]

¹⁵ Hill, S., (2011). ‘Transforming Learning: Engaging Student with the Business Community’. *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, v. 6, 2011. Available at <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/S1479-3628%282011%290000006026>> [Accessed on 25 July 2016]

that the graduates felt that their degrees had been worthwhile and enjoyable, means any criticism or expression of negativity then has particular resonance.

3.1 Pre-Enrolment Advice and Expectations of the Degree

That so few had in-depth knowledge or expectations pre-enrolment around their joint honours degree points to the value of academic advice, say via an application interview, with reciprocal benefits for both the student and the university. The university would be assured that the applicant is well informed and likely to be making a sound decision about their degree, based on an understanding of the degree content and mode of delivery, but also around the post-graduation opportunities towards which a particular degree can lead. From the student's perspective, they would be embarking on their degree with a clear sense of what they are likely to experience and whether they have the aptitude and attitude to succeed, given the nuances of any particular degree design.

3.2 Receiving and Acting Upon Messages

There was a thread running through the survey responses around graduates either not receiving or not acting upon messages meant for them, or not correctly interpreting the importance of communications. The reasons behind this are likely to be multifactorial, some practical, some technological, while others might have a human dimension, either student, staff or both. For example, some extra and co-curricular activities may clash with core teaching in the other subject – this is a practical dilemma for any joint honours student, but their response needs to be one of pro-actively seeking alternatives that will deliver an equivalent benefit, rather than accepting that the opportunity has been missed and feeling frustrated by that.

This pre-supposes that the message was actually delivered and understood. In some cases, technological barriers may mean that communication with joint honours students is imperfect. For example, if a programme team relies on sending out 'programme announcements' via institutional tools such as the virtual learning environment or via programme email lists, then if the joint honours students are attached to their own, separate joint honours programme, these methods may not reach joint honours students via identical channels. If instead the academics have to create bespoke approaches or separate processes then these are liable to be overlooked or inconsistently applied, and the students may miss out. As has been noted previously, 'you don't know what you don't know' until it is too late, which can lead to a sense of disenfranchisement.

Lastly there is the human dimension – if joint honours students are taught alongside single honours students, or other cohorts, then this can result in messages being wrongly attributed as only relevant to other students. For example, if students get used to hearing 'and this for the single honours students only' when referring to a professional body matter, say, or to material taught only to single honours students, then they may switch off to hearing announcements that are actually meant for all students. There is an onus on staff to ensure this scenario is avoided, and indeed to reduce down this sort of separation in the classroom which can lead to a sense of detachment, which then hampers the sustainability of an integrated student experience.

3.3 Engagement with Enrichment Activities

There is an increasingly large range of additional enrichment activities available to all university students, such as trips or visits, internships, placements or work experience, volunteering or community based extra-curricular projects, students' union involvement, student representation or sitting on university panels and committees. That some of the survey respondents seemed to lack broader engagement with these activities seems to point to a possibly systemic misunderstanding or lack of comprehension, during their degree, as to the importance of these activities for their personal and career development. However

the respondents consistently reported that they found employers to be profoundly interested in seeing such activities on students' curriculum vitae, as a means to differentiate between early careerists.

One interpretation of this for joint honours students is that the messages around such activities do not feel contextualized or personalized to them, leading the student to dismiss the opportunity as irrelevant or to have little motivation to become emotionally invested in the outcome. Another reason might be relatively low self-confidence or aspiration on the part of joint honours students, leading them to overly focus on a good academic degree outcome, but at the expense of their broader personal development and enhancement.

The solution to either perspective is for universities to ensure they are inclusive in their approaches, ensuring consistency of communication for all students, whilst also personalizing the message to reassure the intended audience that the activity is relevant, useful and directly enhancing their personal and career development.

3.4 Careers Support

A theme emerged amongst the graduates that they felt they had not had enough of or the right sort of careers support during their degree, in order to best position themselves to enter the graduate jobs market. The reasons for this can only be the subject of conjecture here, however further investigation might yield evidence to support these assertions or otherwise. Starting from the assumption that the university does provide relevant careers support, it may first be surmised that students know about these services but do not engage proactively with them. This may be because of the stress and pressure of assessment or other teaching and learning commitments¹⁶; here the student is failing to manage their time and prioritize effectively and they will need support and development in order to be more productive.

Secondly, students often feel overwhelmed at some point with university life: prioritizing assessment whilst also looking after themselves, budgeting their finances and maintaining a social life places a significant stressful load on students¹⁷. The added burden of attempting to visualize themselves post-graduation, performing successfully in a graduate role, can result in a recourse within themselves and a disengagement with anything but 'essential' tasks. Such students need particularly sensitive support from their personal tutors, and possibly wellbeing services, in order to nurture their confidence and self-efficacy. With the imperative to develop a student's employability skills, well-intentioned universities must be mindful of the sensitivity of some students. While this was not explicitly mentioned by the survey respondents, some did say that they proactively focused purely on learning, at the expense of a broader higher education experience.

Another category of student, represented by several of the survey participants, will be willing to engage with careers support, but may find the offer lacking relevance or usefulness, and it will fail to stimulate them into action. There are methods that can identify and target this segment of the cohort, by offering one-to-one interviews in order to profile the student's characteristics, explore current career plans and gauge their transferable skills, and then develop a personalized programme to support them.

Lastly, there is the ambivalent student for whom the challenge for the university is to pitch and transmit the message so that it is actually received, but also to tailor the communication so it piques the student's interest sufficient to respond and engage. Such students can seem frustrating in their lack of participation with activities that will enrich and develop their graduate attributes and soft skills, despite

¹⁶ Pluut, H., Curseu, P.L., Illies, R., (2015). 'Social and study related stressors and resources among university entrants: Effects on well-being and academic performance'. *Learning and Individual Differences*, Volume 37, pp262-268. Available at <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1041608014002180>> [Accessed 24 July 2016]

¹⁷ Schmidt, L., Sieverding, M., Scheiter, F., Obergfell, J., (2015). 'Predicting and explaining students' stress with the Demand-Control Model: does neuroticism also matter?'. *Educational Psychology*. Jun2015, Vol. 35 Issue 4, p449-465. 17p.

these being so valued by employers.¹⁸ However responsibility rests with the university to convince these adult and independent learners that the offer will benefit them directly and therefore will be worth making changes to the status quo of their lifestyles. For example, engaging with university careers initiatives may require a change to a student's paid work schedule, sporting activities or social life, and this can feel undesirable if the benefits are unclear to the student.

3.5 The Importance of Work Experience

The survey participants mentioned the importance of work experience in response to several questions. Clearly this was feedback they felt motivated to provide, based on their experience of trying to secure graduate job roles in the years after gaining their degrees. While at various points, the graduates commented that other skills are beneficial in making a good impression on potential employers, namely the ability to fill in a job application, knowing how to illustrate points with examples, the acquisition of solid interviewing skills, the confidence derived from having an older mentor, and the development of transferable skills around time-management, team-working, interpersonal skills and self-efficacy. However what is clear is that the respondents felt that employers are looking for these transferable skills not to only have been developed as a consequence of gaining a degree, but having been honed and tested via real-world work experience.

While the gold standard is a placement year out, taken between the second and third years of a degree, the survey respondents were clear that even the most modest exposure to the workplace is valuable. Year after year, employers report that graduates are lacking in customer awareness and business acumen¹⁹. In a competitive graduate jobs market, with the number of graduates increasing year on year, employers can afford to demand more of their early careerists, in addition to a good degree. Specifically, they are looking for an understanding of the basics of what makes organizations successful, good communication skills and teamwork²⁰. If the basics have already been acquired during exposure to an office job or technical role, then the new graduate is perceived as work-ready, and far less of a risk or burden to their first graduate employer.

A number of the survey participants hinted that mandatory placements, internships or work-experience would undoubtedly enhance graduates' abilities to succeed in the jobs market, the compulsory element avoiding the issues of engagement and motivation discussed earlier. This important feedback is worthy of reflection and universities are already seeking to embed such workplace exposure into their degrees, in attempting to ensure their students find graduate positions within six months of graduation, hence contributing to a successful DLHE score. With the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework looking likely to include DLHE as one of the key metrics for assessing a university's score²¹, the pressure to identify and implement such strategies will intensify.

¹⁸ Finch, D.J., Hamilton, L.K., Baldwin, R., Zehner, M., (2013). 'An exploratory study of factors affecting student employability'. *Education + Training*, Volume: 55 Issue: 7, 2013. Available at <<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/action/doSearch?AllField=employability+students&content=articlesChapters>> [Accessed 25 July 2015]

¹⁹ Penaluna, A., Penaluna, K., (2009). 'Creativity in Business / Business in Creativity: Transdisciplinary Curricula as an Enabling Strategy in Enterprise Education'. *Industry & Higher Education*. Jun 2009, Vol. 23 Issue 3, p209-219. 11p.

²⁰ Singh, P., Thambusamy, R.X., (2013). 'Fit or Unfit? Perspectives of Employers and University Instructors of Graduates' Generic Skills'. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Volume 123, 20 March 2014, Pages 315-324

²¹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, (2016). 'Higher education: success as a knowledge economy – white paper'. [online] Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper>> [Accessed on 25 July 2016]

3.6 Postgraduate Study

With the introduction of postgraduate loans for the 2016/17 academic cycle, the UK government is signaling the importance of higher level study to ensure its labour market is highly qualified and able to compete globally²². In this small survey, the majority had already undertaken postgraduate study, or were intending to do so, and this was a requirement of, or to develop their current job roles.

This is possibly a message that new graduates will be reluctant to acknowledge, shouldering as they are the debt burden of tuition fees and maintenance loans, and also including the high cost of living for new graduates in relation to housing and travel in the UK. Nonetheless universities may advantage their graduates by encouraging postgraduate study, and The Sutton Trust found²³ that average lifetime earnings for those holding a postgraduate degree were significantly higher than those with a first degree only - £5,500 higher for those with a masters degree, and an even higher differential in the USA - \$16,500.

3.7 The Effect of having a Joint Honours Degree

The responses accorded with the published data that employers are relatively unconcerned with the title of the award, compared with the importance of having business acumen, a good attitude and high levels of aptitude for learning the job.²⁴ One respondent betrayed their own anxiety over the subjects they had studied, although they had not received any challenge from employers. It is therefore incumbent on universities to ensure that their graduates feel confident that their awards are valuable and credible, and are comparable across all degrees and that they are unlikely to be challenged by prospective employers, except to test the interviewee's ability to respond to a simple query.

In some cases an employer may question the combination of subjects studied but, as demonstrated by the survey participants, this can be grasped as a useful opportunity to demonstrate characteristics such as flexibility and adaptability, having a broad knowledge base, having the ability to accommodate different learning styles and successfully interact with a wide range of people. All graduates should be able to demonstrate these characteristics, but a joint honours graduate, particularly if their subjects seem unusual from the perspective of an employer, have the edge in evidencing that they have succeeded in a more diverse educational learning experience.

This provides an opportunity for the careers support provided to joint honours students to be personalized and contextualized to their unique learning pattern. How much more arresting and motivating for undergraduates if the service is pitched at their individual needs, and towards helping the student to understand how to best utilize the strengths of having a joint honours degree. The students can be developed to positively differentiate themselves, and to have the awareness and skills to showcase their talents effectively. This learned skill²⁵ can be a key focus of any career planning and development intervention.

²² Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, (2015). 'Postgraduate study: student loans and other support – government response'. [online] Available at: < <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/postgraduate-study-student-loans-and-other-support> > [Accessed 25 July 2016]

²³ Lindley, J., Machin, S., (2013). 'The Postgraduate Premium: Revisiting Trends in Social Mobility and Educational Inequalities in Britain and America'. The Sutton Trust. [online] Available at: < <http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Postgraduate-Premium-Report.pdf> > [Accessed 25 July 2016]

²⁴ CBI/Pearson, (2015), Inspiring Growth: CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2015, [online] Available at <<http://news.cbi.org.uk/reports/education-and-skills-survey-2015/education-and-skills-survey-2015/>> [Accessed on 29 February 2016]

²⁵ Manai, A., Holmlund, M., (2015) 'Self-marketing brand skills for business students'. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 33 Iss: 5, pp.749 - 762

4. Conclusion and future research

This study provided a connection with graduates dating back to 2007 and although the number of participants was small, nonetheless a range of significant themes and a consistency of response was identified. In particular that:

- pre-enrolment advice would help manage expectations and facilitate students studying the appropriate degree matching their personal aspirations, motivations, attitude and aptitude
- communication and messages around extra and co-curricular enrichment activities must reach all students via appropriate channels, and be contextualized and personalized to encourage engagement
- support for careers planning and development must address the natural resistance amongst some students to participate in activities that seem generic, lacking in relevance or that conflict with other stressors or demands on their time
- work experience, however modest, is crucial for the appointment to graduate roles, and postgraduate qualifications are increasingly a routine requirement for career advancement within many professions
- having a joint honours degree, as opposed to a single honours degree, is not a barrier to success from the perspective of employers and should be utilized to demonstrate key graduate attributes around curiosity, flexibility and adaptability

This work is part of a broader investigation into the experience and employability of joint honours students. Future research will test more thoroughly the hypothesis that a joint honours degree supports graduate employability as effectively as a single honours degree, and we will also seek comparison data from outside the UK, in order to make inferences for UK graduates. The overall aim is to establish whether joint honours students are well-served by the current employability and career development activities built into their degrees, or available as extra-curricular activities.

The intention is to develop a framework that will assist universities in managing a holistic student experience. The university experience should provide value for money, encourage high levels of student engagement and satisfaction with their degree, and lead to appropriate employment upon graduation, specifically via the development of transferable skills and the customer focus and business acumen gained via exposure to the workplace.

Annex 1:

The Participants

Twelve joint honours graduates responded to an email survey sent out by a current joint honours student. The respondents represented a range of graduates:

Degree: BA (Hons) English with Sociology (2007, 2.1)

Work: Currently work as an Apprenticeship Tutor/Assessor for a training.

Degree: BSc (Hons) Heritage Conservation and History (2008, 2.1)

Work: Parks & Countryside Support Officer

Degree: BSc (Hons) Geography and Accounting (2008, 2.1)

Work: Working in geosciences

Degree: BA (Hons) American Studies, Law and Sociology (2007, 2.1)

Work: Went on to qualify as a careers advisor in schools and FE colleges.

Degree: BA (Hons) Sociology with Popular Music Production (2009, 2.1)

Work: Currently studying for a Master's degree in Social Work at the University of Birmingham.

Degree: BA (Hons) in English with Creative Writing (2009, 2.1)

Work: Pharmacy administrator

Degree: BSc (Hons) Mathematics with Marketing (2008, 2.2)

Work: Senior stock and administration manager

Degree: BA (Hons) Creative Writing and English (2010, 2.1)

Work: Freelance Writer and Web Designer

Degree: BA (Hons) Criminology with Law (2010, 2.2)

Work: Now employed by the national probation service and currently on their postgraduate scheme.

Degree: BSc (Hons) Sports Science & Exercise Science and Marketing (2010, 2.1)

Work: Working in the sports industry

Degree: BA (Hons) English and History (2010, 2.1)

Work: Currently a Senior Analyst at Npower

Degree: BA (Hons) Criminology with Psychology (2009, 2.1)

Work: Deputy manager- Royal Mail

Annex 2

Questionnaire

- 1) Were you aware of the joint honours scheme before applying to university?
- 2) Did you have any pre perceptions of the degree?
- 3) Were you made fully aware of all that was available to you when studying?
- 4) Do you feel you got the most out of your degree?
- 5) Do you feel you were offered the right amount of support to prepare you for a job during and after your degree?
- 6) What was your experience whilst on the joint honours degree?
- 7) Once you graduated were you sufficiently prepared to go into the jobs market?
- 8) Did you go into further study after your degree?
- 9) Did you leave with enough skills and qualifications to pursue your chosen career path?
- 10) Has the significance of a joint honours degree been registered when applying for jobs? Has it been a positive or negative experience?
- 11) Do you feel that the university could have done more either during or after graduating, to increase your chances of employability?
- 12) Have you succeeded in entering your chosen career path?
- 13) Is there anything else that you wish to add regarding either your experience of taking part in a joint honours degree or after graduation?

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