**The Big College Challenge: A Case Study Presenting Interdisciplinary Development of Employability Skills**

**Dr Val Derbyshire, Impact Officer**

**Dr Laurice Fretwell, Course Director: Human Sciences**

**Dr Caroline Harvey, Senior Lecturer**

**University of Derby**

*Introducing the Big College Challenge*

Prior to the formation of the College of Science and Engineering during the academic year 2020/21, the University of Derby’s scientific disciplines were situated within the College of Life and Natural Sciences. The College incorporated students from a diverse range of courses including Biology, Biomedical Health, Forensic Science, Geography, Psychology, Sport and Exercise Science and Zoology. Due to the nature of these courses, the students within the College had limited opportunities to work in an interdisciplinary manner. Considering this, the ‘Big College Challenge’ was designed to enable students to work together in a meaningful way and develop new skills.

To cover the diverse range of subjects that students from the College represented, the Challenge focused on an analysis of sports facilities in Derby and set students the theoretical task of developing a new leisure facility for the city. This involved consideration of a range of factors that might impact on the development of such a facility. For example, location, planning requirements, psychological benefits, environmental assessment requirements, potential impact on crime and disorder in the local area, and the need to ensure accessibility for all. The Challenge took place over one day.

Industry experts from a variety of organisations supported the event and were available throughout the day to provide advice and guidance to the students. The day started with an introduction to the Challenge from a lead industry professional. Other industry experts also shared how their individual expertise could support the students as they addressed the Challenge. Academic and Professional Services staff were also available to facilitate engagement between students and the industry professionals.

Students were allocated to interdisciplinary teams, whereby students from different disciplines were required to work together. This resulted in teams where most students were not known to each other prior to the event. This was important as it helped to replicate the interdisciplinary partnership working that is required of projects of this type, thus allowing students to develop insight and gain a new employability skill. Before they embarked upon their task, students were advised that they would need to present their findings at the end of the day to the industry professionals and that a variety of prizes would be awarded.

During the day, the Challenge was enhanced by several issues that may arise during a large and complicated project of this nature, testing how students and their teams coped with these difficult and unexpected demands as they might occur in the real world. For example, two hours into the Challenge an email was sent out to the teams announcing that ‘great crested newts have been found on site. What mitigation do you need to put in place?’ An hour later, a further email was issued which read: ‘The NHS are interested in your leisure facilities. Can you help them contribute to community health?’ These interruptions to the teamwork reflected the rapidly changing nature of a project and how unforeseen urgent issues may occur.

*Why was the Challenge created?*

We have a diverse range of students at the University of Derby, and we have adopted an institutional approach to inclusive practice, comprising various activities, interventions, strategies and policies to support diverse groups of learners.[[1]](#endnote-1) One consistent characteristic that students who access the facilities of the Careers & Employment Service exhibit is a lack of confidence in employability-related matters. In the light of this, the Challenge aimed to support the development of confidence in key employability skills and provide an opportunity for meaningful engagement with national and local employers.

The University of Derby, as home to the International Centre for Guidance Studies (ICeGS), has been instrumental in embedding the Gatsby Benchmarks into policy.[[2]](#endnote-2) In response to the de-regulation of careers provision in England, following the 2011 Education Act, ICeGS’ research established a framework for how evidence-led careers guidance should be organised. This has resulted in the design and national adoption of the Gatsby Benchmarks in schools and colleges.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The research produced eight areas of provision for evidence-based career guidance and identified three organisational strategies that could be used to implement this. Building on the theme of a whole school approach to guidance, iCeGS researchers, conducted research on behalf of the Gatsby Charitable Foundation. The Gatsby Benchmarks have subsequently been endorsed at the highest level of educational policy. The Department for Education Careers Strategy, published in December 2017, has made it a statutory requirement that every school and college in England should apply the Gatsby Benchmarks by 2020. The Department for Education report Careers strategy: making the most of everyone’s skills and talents, 2017, p7 states ‘We will use the eight Benchmarks of good career guidance, developed by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, to set a standard of excellence’.

If the Gatsby Benchmarks can, as Baroness Bottomley of Nettlestone - a champion for social mobility - commented, provide that ‘measure to assess progress’, in schools and colleges, they can equally enhance employability-related education and address the improvement of Graduate Outcomes for Higher Education students.[[4]](#endnote-4)

There is strong research evidence about the impact of employer engagement upon students. A study conducted by the Education and Employers Taskforce found that where there were higher levels of employer contacts, there were higher returns to individuals in the labour market.[[5]](#endnote-5) The work of the Taskforce demonstrates that these interactions with employers broaden students’ horizons, raise aspirations and challenge stereotypical views often held about the jobs people do based on gender, ethnicity and social background.

Similarly, Gabi Binnie, in a 2020 report for the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (AGCAS) reaches the same conclusions in relation to university students, arguing that employer engagement is a vital element of the university experience. She concludes that not only does engaging with employers during university enhance graduate transitions into employment, but it also supports improved engagement and attainment whilst at university.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Clearly, research suggests that employer/student engagement is beneficial, but not all students are taking the opportunities provided by Higher Education institutions to engage with employers. As academics and professionals, we recognise that many students do not have the confidence to engage and network efficiently with employers. However, student confidence, and the employability skills most sought as graduate attributes, are seen to increase as a result of targeted employer networking.[[7]](#endnote-7) Indeed, lack of confidence in employer engagement is recognised as a common issue for students. Many clients require help in developing the confidence to engage effectively with employers, yet this ability to network is key to the success of meaningful employer engagement with students.[[8]](#endnote-8) Networking is a vital skill and one which students need to develop in order to create career success as graduates. One way in which confidence can be developed is through facilitating a warm introduction with employers.[[9]](#endnote-9) The Big College Challenge effectively provided this warm introduction through the opening talks from the industry professionals, held in the familiar forum of the lecture theatre.

The event, from the beginning, aimed to imbue students with the courage of confidence which is so essential in career interactions.[[10]](#endnote-10) The students needed to engage with employers directly in order to succeed in the tasks presented to them. The Challenge aimed to increase the students’ confidence in working in interdisciplinary groups, and in engaging with employers and academics, which in turn encouraged the development of transferrable employability skills.

*Conclusion: The Outcome of the Big College Challenge*

Preliminary analysis of interim data, from research currently in progress concerning the Challenge, indicates that both staff and employers involved in the delivery of the event noted an increase in confidence levels in students during the course of the day. Students and employers also recognised the relevance of the event in enhancing employability skills. Overwhelmingly, students reported enjoying the Challenge and provided positive feedback. This was supported by the industry professionals who commented that they were extremely impressed by the innovative and well-rounded solutions individual teams presented. The teams found a way to get to know each other and work together quickly, and many stayed in contact after the event was over. Some teams won prizes including theatre and football match tickets and employability workshops, which enabled them to network again in the future.

Whilst we cannot change the facts of social mobility, what we can do as academics and professionals in Higher Education is work to increase the confidence of our students and provide them with meaningful opportunities to engage with employers, and ultimately enhance their graduate outcomes.[[11]](#endnote-11) This is something we believe was achieved through the Big College Challenge.

1. The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), The Future of Student Outcomes, pp 6-7, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Gatsby Foundation, Good Career Guidance, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. T. Hooley, J. Marriott, A. G. Watts and L Coiffait, Careers 2020: Options for Future Careers Work in English School, 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. House of Lords, Careers Education for Students, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Education for Employers, The Case for Employer Engagement in State Schools, 2018. Available at: <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Research-summary-website-version.pdf>, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. G Binnie, Evaluating the Effectiveness of Employer Engagement: A Report by the AGCAS Employer Engagement Task Group, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. H Thompson, Work Experience Policy and Quality Assurance Guidelines: University of Derby, 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hambly and Bomford, Creative Career Coaching, p90, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hambly and Bomford, Creative Career Coaching, p 181, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Liane Hambly, The Courage of Confidence: The Role of Faith in Career Choice in Constructing the Future, Career Guidance for Changing Contexts, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. D Phoenix, Designing an English Social Mobility Index, HEPI, p14, 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)