Principles of partnership: embedding employability in curriculum design

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Abstract

The higher education sector is seeing an increasingly competitive environment for student recruitment, in which students make decisions on the basis of the quality of teaching and learning (T&L), the overall student experience, the strength of student engagement and the student voice. It is important that programmes are also seen to develop effectively the abilities and skills required to enhance student employability. The aim of the curriculum review project described in this case study was to develop a collaborative, holistic, programme-level approach to the development of a suite of MSc programmes in the Department of Food & Nutritional Sciences at the University of Reading, the goal being to structure T&L provision in order to produce graduates able to apply multi-disciplinary scientific principles in practical, real-world situations. So as to generate a professional profile succinct enough to be embedded in the curriculum and inspire new T&L practices, staff, students and employers contributed to the exercise through workshops, curriculum and assessment mapping sessions, output creation and analysis.

Introduction: organisational and historical context

The nature of staff-student partnership is evolving. Pedagogical models have moved from treating students as passive consumers of subject knowledge towards methods focused on ownership and application. Bovill and Woolmer (2019) argue that programme structures not only should include space for innovation and creativity, but must also be relevant to learners. If this is to be achieved, student involvement is critical. Student partnership ensures that assumptions about the utility of education are tested and that programmes are provided which reflect the expectations of students as key stakeholders. Alongside this evolving partnership, higher education institutions (HEIs) must provide programmes responsive to student and industry requirements, enhance employability and, at the same time, maintain a quality student experience. However, it is recognised that employability should not focus simply on 'employment'; it should enhance the ability of the student to develop critical, reflective competencies (Harvey, 2003). This requires the development and application of teaching methods which encourage deeper learning through engagement (Olosegun, 2015). In line with T&L strategy (University of Reading, 2018), the Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences (FNS) at the University of Reading (UoR) undertook a review of the postgraduate taught curriculum in an effort to enhance student experience and the employability of graduates. An additional driver for change was the Curriculum Framework (CF) (University of Reading, 2019), an institutional project designed to support academic colleagues in embedding strategic priorities into the curriculum. It demands consistent review, to ensure that programmes align with the core academic and pedagogic principles. Its aim is to facilitate T&L enhancement of strategic priorities in ways which support students, enabling them to develop the essential attributes for twenty-first century lives, including:

- increasing student engagement with academic study through best practice approaches to supporting students to become independent learners;
- equipping students with the aspirations, confidence and skills to become highly employable graduates.

Specific 'postgraduate taught' (PGT) metrics, such as the postgraduate taught experience survey (PTES) and, to a lesser extent, the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework (TEF) and the national student (undergraduate) survey (NSS) reflect the need to engage students, generate employable graduates and use student feedback to refine programmes. These metrics demonstrate how employability and student engagement are currently defined. An awareness of this helps to establish an approach to curriculum review by articulating what are essentially success criteria, on which the programme will be evaluated by its main stakeholder. In the PTES, 'student engagement' is defined as engagement focusing on opportunities a) to share information with colleagues and academic staff and b) to provide feedback, while 'employability' is referred to as skills development and focuses on the development of confidence and competency in skills that will benefit a student's future career. The PTES questions measure how students see development embedded within programmes. The key question for any programme leader is how to enhance engagement and employability (skills development) within T&L provision, refining, developing and articulating good practice in teaching and assessment and thereby potentially improving outcomes in those same metrics.

Approach: specifications of the project

FNS recognised the need to develop PGT programmes that offer strong student experience, incorporate the student voice through partnership and embed employability into delivery of subject content. The programmes must enhance the knowledge and skills of students from a range of scientific disciplines and communicate, reinforce and scaffold development clearly and explicitly (Pegg *et al.*, 2012). In order to achieve this, the project focused on creating a collaborative, holistic, programme-level approach to the development of a suite of MSc programmes. Engagement and employability were two of the project's underpinning principles, defined to ensure that they successfully drove curriculum change.

Engagement is often operationalised as the opportunities provided by the programme to issue feedback, but this is engagement only on a surface level, using students as a data source for the evaluation of existing courses. A deeper form of engagement is preferable and is enshrined in the UoR Principles of Partnership (PoP) (University of Reading, 2019):

- Is based on values of trust and respect;
- Is empowering and inclusive;
- Enables the co-delivery of meaningful change;
- Involves negotiated responsibility for both the process and outcomes of enhancement activities;
- Creates a sense of belonging to an academic community.

Engagement is considered most effective when achieved through partnership or co-creation, a link that is reflected in the literature (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). In this case study, the focus of student partnership is employability and embedding skills development within the curriculum.

Employability is often equated to skills, resulting from a focus on student development. Furthermore, it is often confused with what in this project is termed 'employment', which is a measure of outcome. Employment is a metric integrally connected to employability. However, owing to numerous confounding external factors, it is difficult to correlate to T&L quality or to the students' own development and experience. Indeed, students' perceptions are rarely fully explored and it is suggested that these perceptions may not align with those of academic staff and employers (Tymon, 2013).

The risk of an overtly outcomes-based definition is that it encourages the notion that employability is something that happens separately from study of subject content. It is perhaps for this reason that graduates struggle to articulate their skills or how they have developed, through study, beyond memorising subject content. Increasingly, research suggests the benefits of embedding employability within T&L practice (Knight and Yorke, 2004). Seeing employability as embedded allows the programme to refine its T&L offering through authentic pedagogy and assessment, geared towards developing the skills that a graduate will need to gain employment. Secondly, it enables the graduate to articulate her/his own capabilities, either in order to gain employment or simply to attribute that development to the programme (Cole and Tibby, 2013).

As the employability landscape is fluid, engaging students on employability is necessary in order to ensure that the definition is current. The student voice is most valuable when considered in conjunction with that of other key stakeholders. In this case, there was a need to juxtapose student input with staff and employer feedback, in order to generate a robust definition of employability that could be embedded in the curriculum. There is no shortage of work done in the field of employability, with any number of alternative lists of skills presented by the literature. However, the challenge lies in developing an approach that can be owned, implemented and maintained by a programme team. Lists of skills must not be cumbersome or sit alone in any one sphere – academic, industry or student experience – as this jeopardises their chances of being utilised. For this reason, the output of the project needed to focus on four areas:

1. **Partnership**: being cognisant of each stakeholder context to enable the co-delivery of meaningful change;
2. **Authenticity**: embedding employability in a way that inspires and acknowledges authentic T&L and assessment practice;
3. **Programme coherence**: providing programme-level guidance for acknowledging the development of learners beyond subject learning;
4. **Curriculum framework**: utilising the University's CF in order to realise and embed policy aims.

Method: Discussion of pedagogy, practice and implementation

The method for the project was developed by the academic development team within the Centre for Quality Support and Development (CQSD) at UoR as a means of structuring curriculum review. It used the CF to align findings to T&L strategy, widen the definition of skills and ensure that curriculum-embedded employability encompasses all graduate attributes. The attributes are: mastery of the discipline, research and enquiry, personal effectiveness and global engagement. Because the authority for programme development sits within academic departments, the approach varies, dependent upon each department's

specific aims and ambitions. FNS engaged in initial consultations with CQSD and together they developed a collaborative plan that would enable the method to work in the context of the department. The collaborative engagement between FNS and CQSD is the most successful to date and enabled a full realisation of the method from engagement and investigation to resource creation and curriculum development. The method involved three phases:

- engagement workshops;
- curriculum mapping;
- curriculum enhancement.

Engagement workshops

The first stage of the process involved a series of engagement workshops, designed to generate partnership between three stakeholder groups with an interest in graduate employability and the University curriculum: academic staff, students and employers. The staff group consisted of academics teaching on the programmes. Access to employers was gained by introducing the activity at an established employer advisory board meeting. Students were drawn from current PGT students and alumni and were recruited with the aim of capturing the diversity of the student cohort. Student course representatives were invited and all participated. An invitation was sent to all current PGT students, with follow-up emails to student sub-groups that were not represented. Ultimately, the students in the workshop represented the following: full-time, part-time, United Kingdom (UK), European Union (EU), international, mature and those progressing directly from a primary degree. Students were present who were taking the programmes as conversion masters as well as those with primary degrees in nutrition and food science. Each workshop had twelve to fifteen participants. The workshops began with an introduction by an FNS staff member and the sessions were then facilitated by staff from CQSD.

This three-workshop format was necessary to achieve two things: to ensure that no single perspective was disproportionately represented out of context; to allow the project to manage the impact of any preconceptions that might exist within groups (e.g. any tendency that academic staff might define skills solely against mastery of subject content, at the expense of other factors such as research and enquiry or personal effectiveness). Three sessions involved the completion of the three activities organised around a central concept of facilitation, each with a briefback to the group:

1. shortlisting skills
2. Curriculum Framework mapping
3. consideration of assessment

Activity 1: Shortlisting skills

Activity one involved prioritising a longlist of skills and creating a shortlist in order of importance. The session was based on the concept of 'ranking' – a decision-making technique that helps the group select the most appropriate and relevant idea. The members of the group must determine a selection criterion to use, in order to guide their personal decision-making process (Larkins, 2019). Skills were amalgamated from several sources, so as to ensure that the skills were both general and contextual. Many of the sources selected

skills very specific to the context of the investigation or so general that they required further exploration in order to determine what they represented. It was important that this study included the list of most common employability elements from the literature, but also alluded to a wider set of skills. The amalgamation also ensured that the list was not limited to the context of any one study or subject discipline, in order to enable the group to make choices from the most complete set of options. The aim was to encourage a definition of employability that was inclusive of all aspects of the CF and allowed: participants to look beyond their conditioning and acknowledge the wider picture; staff to see beyond mastery of the discipline; and employers to see beyond personal effectiveness. Skills from several other sources were therefore included, to allow participants to build this wider picture and facilitate useful and relevant discussion (Cushing and Gantz, 2016; Microsoft, 2016; Target Jobs, 2018; Weston *et al.*, 2017).

Group members were encouraged to discuss openly their interpretation of any term, applying knowledge of their own context in the process. This generated a group understanding of each employability term, applying meaning and allowing participants to develop understanding and take ownership, so enabling the group to prioritise effectively. It was also made clear that the group could alter or add any terms as required.

Activity 2: Curriculum Framework mapping

Activity 2 consisted of taking the shortlist of agreed skills and mapping them to the CF. The approach is based on the concept of 'meta-planning', a technique that encourages the expression of participants' thoughts on the issue, often by their writing key words on Post-it notes and then collectively placing and arranging them into sub-groups on a flipchart or wall space (Seeds for Change, 2019). It encourages the group to represent its thinking visually, so providing the opportunity to gain deeper understanding and refine its members' priorities. They were given opportunity to reassess the priority list or redistribute any of the skills. The group feedback session discussed what the CF map represented in terms of the curriculum, encouraging group members to investigate their own expectations of what the curriculum could and should deliver in order to generate employable graduates.

A common trend emerged from the workshop, in that all groups initially classed all the skills as important. However, in all cases, a prioritisation or grouping of skills occurred. Discussion led to the 'separation of skill and knowledge' and the appropriateness of ethical awareness as a skill to be developed.

Activity 3: Consideration of assessment

In this activity, the groups were asked to determine if their shorted-listed skills were assessable or non-assessable and, ultimately, to select one of each within each of the four graduate attributes. Such an exercise is useful in bringing participants to the realisation that not all skills are directly assessable. However, it is important to note that skills that are not directly assessable should be ignored. Decisions about what was assessable varied between the groups.

Curriculum mapping and enhancement

As follows, the curriculum mapping and curriculum enhancement phases took place through a staff away day and programme team meetings:

The final shortlists from each workshop were consolidated and presented to all FNS academic staff at an away day. This elicited further discussion about the distinction between assessable and indirectly assessable skills. Staff voted on the importance of the skills under each of the four graduate attributes and the top two in each category were taken forward to be part of the employability skills profiles for the PGT programmes. This session enabled staff to hear reflections on the workshops. Incorporating the students' and employers' voice in this way gave academic staff a broader understanding of the benefits of the project and added value to the final profile. The employability skills profile was also used in the ensuing away-day activities, when staff used it during the development of assessment strategies. Subsequently, skills development could be easily mapped across the curriculum. The outcome of this mapping process was presented to staff and elicited further enhancement of assessment strategies and the curriculum. It was clear to staff where there was a high degree of replication.

Conclusion: Impact, evaluation and reflection

The employability profile has influenced the creation of several outputs, ensuring that the student voice is captured and actioned. A subsequent visual representation of skills assessment across the programme has allowed staff and students to identify where and when skills are being practised and assessed. The map also establishes how the skills are scaffolded across the programme. This has been presented to students as the foundation of their understanding of the course. Module convenors refer to this during module introductions and are encouraged to find ways of reinforcing it throughout the year. In addition, the findings from this case study have been presented to PGT programme leaders across UoR. This has led to requests to share the visual skills mapping tools outside FNS. New T&L practices, such as the professional development portfolio, are also now being implemented, leading for the first time to explicit communication between staff and students regarding systematic development of employability skills. The project highlighted the need for a school values statement, which now acts as a guide for students on the course and reinforces programme learning objectives. On reflection, the facilitation of the workshops by CQSD staff rather than academic staff was successful and is to be recommended. This approach is likely to have reduced any risk of either academic staff-student power imbalance or inadvertent influencing by academic staff of the student voice. In terms of partnership, the project has been successful in establishing a template for engagement and review. Both students and employers reflected positively on their engagement. The programme team has benefited from the approach, to the extent that the findings are being exploited by undergraduate programmes. The method used enabled all academic staff to feed into the process and understand the role students and employers played. Capturing the student and employer voice in this way increased the resilience and value of the employability profile to academic staff.

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