

The Seven Steps to Success - A student-led employability programme led by the University of Portsmouth Students' Union

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Introduction

The University of Portsmouth is situated within the context of English Higher Education, where recent governmental regulation has outlined that at least 60% of all first degree graduates (e.g. Bachelors/Honours) must progress onto graduate level occupations (Higher-Medium Skilled/Professional Roles, Further Study or Director of a Company) (Office for Students, 2022). This regulatory pressure with financial penalties is combined with increasing evidence of student demand that a graduate outcome or career is the top reason for enrolling in Higher Education (UCAS, 2021; Curnock Cook, 2021). Oliver (2015) states that employability is about enabled graduates who are equipped for the working world, where universities globally are working to support students to become equipped for their future career.

Higher Education Institutions have historically funded different initiatives to build students' employability skills. First and most prominent, investment in careers and employability services provide one-to-one advice and workshops to support students' career management (Reddan, 2015; Buckingham and Clifton, 2001; Super et al, 1963). In addition, enrichment activities are encouraged to support student development, such as enterprise education, extra-curricular activities, work placements and international exchanges (Coldham et al, 2021; Moxey and Simpkin, 2021; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). All of the above offer opportunities for employability skills development and career management, yet there are persistent issues with not all students engaging, and therefore risking graduating without the above desired

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benefits. In the 2000s, there were movements towards Professional Development Planning schemes (PDP) to motivate students to engage with portfolios (Bleetman and Webb, 2009), and later in the UK, the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) offering a transcript of achievements (HEAR, 2024). These schemes are often university-wide and do not benefit from disciplinary relevance, taking place outside of the degree, much like careers advisory services and extra-curricular enrichments. Therefore, there is an increasing priority for further work being needed to embed employability into the curriculum and increase student engagement (Lowe, 2023; Underwood, 2022; AdvanceHE, 2021). It is within this space, by creating a Students' Union-led Professional Development Planning initiative, that the Seven Steps to Success programme attempts to attain high engagement as well as complement the curriculum.

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Background

The origins of the project were the desire of the Students' Union Elected Officer, building on her personal experience as a student, and mandated by her election on a campaign commitment to develop a tailored learning experience with subject-specific, employability-focused support across academic schools. The objective was to create an initiative that would provide tailored disciplinary guidance and opportunities for students' subject areas and/or career ambitions. This was achieved through creating an online tailor-made employability programme called the Seven Steps to Success programme for a single academic school across each of the five faculties in order to enhance graduate outcomes and allow students to stand out in the increasingly competitive graduate job market.

The Seven Steps to Success Programme was built within Portsmouth's Virtual Learning Environment, a location regularly used by students and staff. A separate site was created for each of the five participating schools, where the information, guidance, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are tailor-made for each disciplinary area, meaning there is a bespoke Seven Steps to Success programme for each academic school. Each page featured the seven activities listed below, which included text, visual and video information, followed

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by a series of reflective activities for students to complete. Once students had completed all activities, students' reflections were assessed by the Careers and Employability Service. If students required any further support, or if developmental areas were identified, the Careers Team would offer support and access to their advice and resource services. If the students had met the requirements, based on agreed criteria to meet the reflection standard, they would be awarded certification of the Seven Steps to Success Award.

The Seven Steps:

Step 1: Exploring your professional identity: Career Profiles.

Step 2: Developing your specific skillset: Extra-curricular activities.

Step 3: Developing your transferable skillset: Student Societies.

Step 4: Translating your skillset effectively: Networking, CVs and Interviews.

Step 5: Establishing your professional identity: Work experience.

Step 6: Imparting your knowledge: The Students' Union.

Step 7: Becoming a successful Portsmouth Graduate.

Overview

The Seven Steps to Success Programme (7S) is a collaborative project between academic schools, the University of Portsmouth Students' Union (UPSU) and Careers and Employability Service (CES) that aims to incentivise student engagement with co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities offered across the institution. The programme is presented as a seven-step journey on the Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) for students to follow throughout their time at university. The programme was created to look more engaging than a typical educational resource and the standard Moodle pages, and was displayed prominently on Moodle, which is where students engage with the curriculum. Through participating in the 7S programme, students have to engage in activities and opportunities

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across the institution or local community, enabling them to gain the key skills needed to achieve their career goals.

To evidence that students have engaged with the 7S Programme and qualified in each step of the programme, students have to complete a short reflective submission form that is then verified by CES staff. Upon completion, students receive an official University of Portsmouth and UPSU joint award of recognition presented at the Union Awards ceremony. This acts as an invaluable addition to students' CVs, proving to employers that students made the most of their time at university, through graduating not only with a degree, but also with the experience and skills that are needed to stand out amongst the thousands of other graduates competing for the same opportunities in an increasingly competitive job market. Relating to both the university's and Portsmouth's strategic imperatives, the goal of 7S is to enhance the student experience and their academic success, increase uptake of placement years and improve graduate outcomes.

The 7S Programme has been piloted in five academic schools, with the intention that each academic school would have their own bespoke version of the programme, providing information, guidance and opportunities specifically tailored to their student cohort. Following the pilot, a workshop brought together key stakeholders, and a revised version of the 7S Programme will be run in the 2023/24 academic year, keeping the best elements of the pilot programme and the most useful elements to make bespoke, but enabling scaling up across the whole institution - from five schools to twenty.

Partnership Implementation

The key to the success of the project was that the Learning Experience Officer (UPSU) worked in partnership with academic schools, the Dean of Learning and Teaching, the Department of Curriculum and Quality Enhancement (DCQE) and the Careers and Employability Service (CES) to create the meaningful professional development programme over a sustained period of time. This is best illustrated through a timeline:

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July 2021:

Students voted for the creation of a programme like 7S (2021 - 775 votes)

August - December 2021:

Met and consulted with members of CES and the majority of Heads of Department (HoDs) or their representatives across the institution to pitch the initial ideas of 7S and gain feedback to better inform the programme. All HoDs and CES approved of the 7S model.

February 2022:

University's Student Experience Committee approved a pilot of 7S with five academic schools (one per faculty):

- School of Film, Media & Communication
- School of Mechanical Design & Engineering Psychology
- School of Area Studies, History, Politics & Literature
- School of Law
- School of Psychology

A Strategic Steering Group was established, responsible for creating and agreeing on the structure and content of the programme and its Moodle sites:

- UPSU Learning Experience Officer
- UoP Dean of Teaching & Learning
- UoP Senior Online Course Developer
- UPSU Students' Union Chief Executive
- UPSU Head of Careers & Employability Service
- UPSU Representative Associate Dean Students

March 2022:

Re-elected with 1354 votes to expand 7S into all academic schools.

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June - August 2022:

In collaboration with academics and CES, UPSU curated, wrote and edited content for each 7S programme to ensure the language was student-friendly, enticing and relevant. Other online resources (statistics) were incorporated. All content was approved by each stakeholder and the 7S steering group.

August - September 2022:

The Steering Group approved the '7S Student Engagement Framework', outlining the strategy and deliverables for each stakeholder to increase students' awareness and participation with 7S.

Multiple levels of partnership

Partnership ran throughout the project, all led by the Learning Experience Officer, who forged partnerships at both strategic and operational levels. The most impactful partnerships were with the Dean of Learning and Teaching, who was able to support with navigating university approval structures, stakeholder engagement of the project, and aligning the project with strategic objectives. This enabled the Learning Experience Officer to be efficient with their time and have backing from higher management to implement the Students' Union-led project. Secondly, the operational partnerships forged with members of the Department for Curriculum Quality and Enhancement, and Careers and Employability Service, where team members directly supported the project through co-authoring guidance materials for the programme and building the VLE pages. Following the launch of the project in 2022-23, the partnership continued with an operational steering group and a co-authored evaluation between the university and Students' Union. It was absolutely key to ensure that students, and indeed staff, were aware of the 7S programme. Thus, the 7S Student Engagement Framework was a key foundation within the project.

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7S Student Engagement Framework

A great deal of the work to engage students with 7S was led by the Elected Learning Experience Officer, as can be seen on this timeline:

August 2022:

Presentation to staff at university's Learning & Teaching Conference.

September 2022:

UPSU's annual Freshers' Fayre, which had 11,695 student footfall over three days.

UPSU shared 7S posts via social media.

Learning Experience Officer (UPSU) arranged to attend staff induction meetings to raise staff awareness of 7S so that course leaders would feel confident in promoting the programme in class or via digital comms.

7S promotional video was shown during the induction period to all students belonging to pilot schools.

Heads of Schools belonging to pilot schools agreed course leaders would send an email to their student cohorts, encouraging participation.

October 2022:

Digital screens showing short promotional clips across campus.

November 2022:

UPSU newsletter was sent to all students raising awareness of 7S.

Careers Service shared 7S posts via social media.

UoP included 7S in the all-staff newsletter.

December - January 2023:

No promotions due to the Christmas break and assessment period.

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February 2023:

Learning Experience Officer (UPSU) trained all senior student representatives, e.g., Faculty Reps and Course Rep Assistants (paid student roles) on 7S.

Senior Student Representatives were then tasked to train all course reps (unpaid voluntary role) belonging to the pilot schools 7S exists in. Once all course reps were trained on the programme and understood the benefits of 7S and how it works, they were tasked with encouraging the wider student body to enrol on the programme. This was achieved through various means, e.g., asking the class to stay behind for five minutes after a lecture. To incentivise student reps, UPSU had arranged for £100 vouchers to be awarded to the reps who enrol the most students per faculty.

Those course reps not belonging to a school that 7S exists in, were tasked with disseminating a survey for students to register their interest.

Results

In the first-year pilot, when students were permitted to complete just some of the steps if they wished, and could take the programme across the three years of their undergraduate university journey, we had a total of 230 enrolments and 31 submissions. The programme is not linear and, due to the 7 tasks they have to complete in order to gain certification, the expectation is that it would be more common for students to complete the programme over a longer period of time. This should be considered when reviewing engagement statistics for the pilot year. It is further recognised that student engagement was generally low in the post-Covid pandemic period, however, given some of the issues faced during the pilot and that a great deal of the student engagement work fell to one person, the enrolment statistics are promising.

The total number of student enrolments and submissions per academic school significantly varied and those with more proactive awareness and marketing strategies had the highest numbers of students engaging in the first year of the pilot. For example, one academic school had over 3 times the number of enrolments. This school delivered tutorials on how to navigate

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the programme. The school with the lowest engagement relied solely on the induction period at the start of the year to advertise the programme.

Engagement by Course & Student Characteristics:

- Majority of students were full-time.
- Representative amount of People of the Global Majority (PGM) students.
- Some international and mature students.
- All levels of study engaged with the programme.

Figure 1 shows most students that engaged in the 7S programme are young students (73.9%), and the majority of students engaged were on campus learners (97%). Additionally, there was a fairly representative amount of engagement for PGM students. Approximately 37% of students at Portsmouth are PGM students. Alongside that, around 33% of students who engaged with 7S were PGM students. From this, it would be fair to say that proportionally, the demographic responses are representative of the wider PGM community.

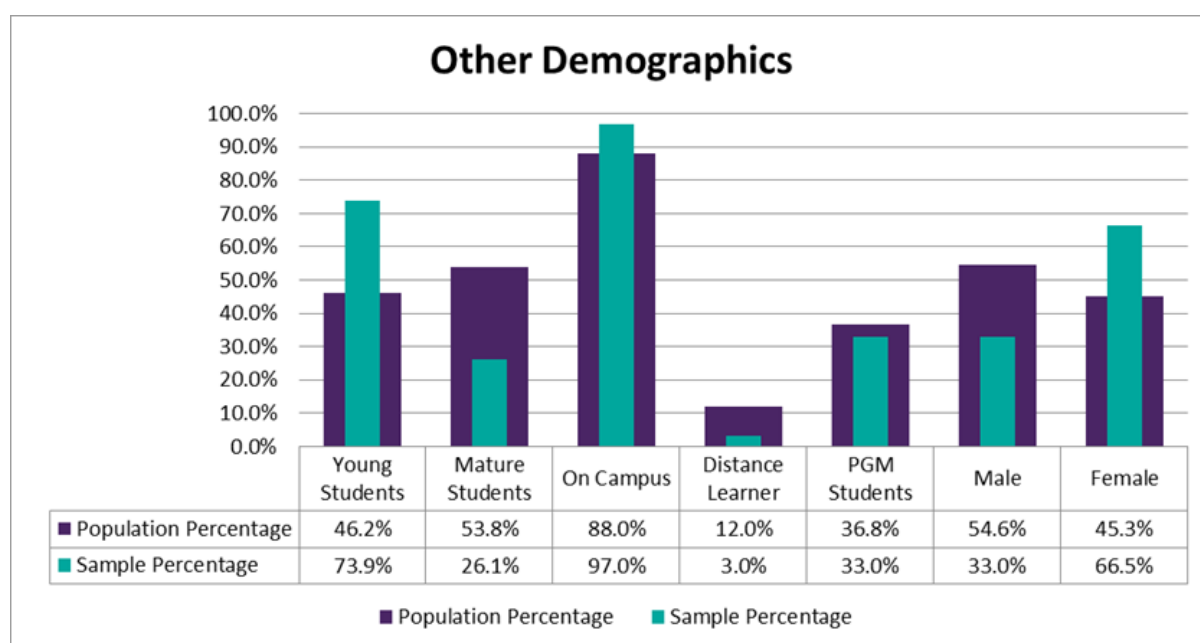


Figure 1: Turquoise bars refer to students who engaged with the 7S programme by other demographics: young/mature, on campus/distance learner, PGM/white, male/female. Purple bars represent the overall student population.

Lessons learned

The outcome of a workshop that recently took place was a strengthened partnership with Careers in order to maximise the potential of 7S so that it is fit for purpose as a university-wide initiative for the 2024 academic year.

Workshop outcomes

- CES and SU to co-badge a new Portsmouth Award (to succeed the Seven Steps to Success Programme Award).
- CES and SU to co-resource Portsmouth Award as a flagship partnership project at Portsmouth.
- A revised plan for Portsmouth Award that would report to the Employment Group, with a potential new name to be decided through a workshop of employers and students.
- The Portsmouth Award to be reviewed to maximise impact and enable greater accessibility to students, with a view to being spread across all Schools for September 2024.
- The Portsmouth Award to maintain its highly perceived relatability through 'bespoke elements', but the way in which this is achieved is yet to be discussed.
- The lead contact for the Portsmouth Award would be the Head of Student Development, UPSU and Director of Student Employment and Employability, University of Portsmouth.

This resulted in a Mission Statement: "To co-create an inclusive employability programme that engages all students to be confident in achieving their full graduate potential".

Another lesson learned was around communications. Through dealing with a number of issues during the pilot that led to varying engagement rates between schools, ensuring a consistent approach to communications with both academics and student is vital. It is clear that there is a need for more staff to lead the 7S programme in future, as it scaled up and drove the partnership between academic schools, something that the revised 7S model is anticipated to achieve under its new title of the Portsmouth Award. One way to ensure this is

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through embedding communications into existing faculty employability and event plans to achieve the following points:

1. Employability awards should be embedded into all university communications and initially sent out at the start of the academic year, when engagement is at its highest.
2. Employability awards should be embedded into existing communications about school-level extra-curricular and co-curricular opportunities, as well as those offered through the Students' Union and Careers and Employability Services. This is because students need to engage in these opportunities to qualify for many of the steps of the programme, therefore it is vital that academics in charge of the promotion and delivery of these activities are also demonstrating the links between the activities and the 7S programme:
 - a. Embedding the following line of communication in all initial communications associated with extra-curricular and co-curricular activities: "Did you know if you engage with (X,Y,Z) opportunity, you would have qualified for step 4 in the 7S programme, meaning you're one step closer to achieving the 7S award?"
 - b. Embedding the following line of communication in the delivery of all extra-curricular and co-curricular activities: "Did you know you have qualified for step (X,Y,Z) by participating in this activity? Go onto the 7S Moodle page and log that you've done this to be one step closer to achieving the 7S award."

It is the intention that the new Portsmouth Award model will have much greater investment in terms of staff involvement driving the work and resources, to ensure continued success of the 7S programme and an increased rate of student/staff awareness and participation.

Not everything changed

In the new Portsmouth Award model, much has stayed the same. The aims, objectives and conceptual framework have remained the same since launch:

Aims and objectives

The Portsmouth Award will help the University with:

- Meeting regulatory requirements for Student Outcomes.
- Helping academics to achieve their quality assurance action planning and student experience targets.
- Helping the University of Portsmouth meet strategic imperatives and recruitment targets.
- Leading as an example of authentic co-creation practice with students.
- Supporting academics with incentivising their students to participate in their existing extra-curricular activities.

The Portsmouth Award will help the Students' Union with:

- Meeting strategic imperatives.
- Raising levels of engagement with UPSU activities.
- Establishing and strengthening new and existing relationships at a local level.
- Leading in the digitalisation of education and online presence.

The Portsmouth Award will help students by:

- Providing a tailored learning experience to meet their needs and the needs they are yet to identify.
- Providing them with a better chance at securing work placements.
- Enabling them to successfully compete with graduates from other universities that have been awarded the very same degree.

Conclusion

We have learnt a number of lessons from our project. Notably, Students' Unions are often an untapped resource to support with student outcome initiatives. The success of this project was that it was led by the SU for students. Another important point was that there is a need in the sector to create holistic approaches to employability that are inclusive of all opportunities across large institutions. One of the key reasons the Elected Officer wished to create this resource was not only to support the signposting of the relevant resources at a local level for students (their academic school and their course) but also to support the wider university and SU drive to enhance employability, doing so in a joined-up fashion and also signposting relevant university-wide resources.

One key finding from the project we wish to share with the sector is about the decision to use the VLE for this resource, although it is not always easy to make a very technical and website-like resource on a VLE. Universities have a proliferation of platforms where there may be opportunities in Moodle/Canvas/VLEs, as often students will only engage with core Virtual Learning Environments. We also noted from our student and staff feedback that balancing high relevance with flexibility leads to higher student engagement. Finally, challenges remain for the continuing project in developing tailored, discipline-focused resources that match with resource implications.

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