

Students4WebES Edited Project Report

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Preface

This project report has been submitted to highlight some of the issues of engaging with students as partners in Further Education (FE). Although the project finished in 2013, the issues raised are still relevant within the sector. The following article follows a shortened Jisc report format of: Project Summary, Introduction, Project Activity, Outputs, Lessons Learnt and Final Thoughts. The full project report is available (Students4webES, 2014b).

Project Summary

The Students for Webinar and Employability Skills (Students4webES) project was run at Abingdon and Witney College between October 2012 and April 2013. The project was funded by the Jisc Advance FE and Skills Programme and aimed to develop employability skills for Level 3 FE students through the use of video conferencing and webinars and assess whether this was a beneficial digital employability skill. Students were trained in video conferencing and running a webinar, with the aim of setting up and running between 7-15 short webinars with employers on the theme of ‘What does an employer want from an employee?’ Additionally, the project aimed to produce:

- a student-centred guide to running a webinar;
- recordings of employer webinars (with full consent from employer) for use in future tutorials related to employability;
- a student-led conference, supported by the Jisc Regional Support Centre South East (RSC SE), on the theme of employability skills using video conferencing and webinars.

Introduction

This project sought to draw together learner-centred training for video conferencing and webinar skills (individual and group) with links to employers. A core group of volunteer students, alongside project staff, received training on working online and running a webinar, with a view to designing short webinar sessions with invited employers. Participating employers used the webinar to outline the skills they were looking for in a future employee and answered brief questions from student groups. These sessions were recorded and are available for use with individuals or groups looking at employment skills (Students4webES, 2014b).

This project took the developing use of video conferencing to the level of explicitly recognising the value to students of learning to work online within agreed guidelines, a skill recognised as an asset on a student CV. One student involved in the project had joined it “*to gain insight into both webinars and employability skills. To add to (my) CV and personal statement (for university application).*” This proved to be a common theme amongst the learners involved.

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The outputs from this project included a learner-designed guide, in the form of a poster, on 'Students' Top Tips for Running a Webinar', as well as access to the recorded webinars run with the eight employers involved in the project. A learner-run conference on employability skills also formed part of the project and included an employer who had participated in it.

Of the six employers who participated in evaluation interviews, all indicated that their perception of digital employability skills had changed, for reasons ranging from the usefulness of having an additional IT skill to coming to understand how many useful skills are needed to set up and run a webinar.

The project was initially based in the Professional Futures Programme (PFP), a pioneering Level 3 cross-curricular programme which brought together students studying a range of subjects for core modules in employability and other skills.

This project may have had only six students who remained throughout in the core group, but it was to lead to a significant improvement in the quality of the learner experience by enabling the theory of employability skills to be put into practice. The project provided an example to the sector in creating student-centred resources, both for the use of video conferencing and the setting-up and running of webinars as an employability skill and a case study. Additionally, it promoted the idea within the college that webinars can encourage the development of access to education and training for those who are otherwise unable to attend in person on a regular basis.

Project Activity

Institutional research is not part of the culture in FE and the appeal to students of participating in a project appeared to be limited. Over four hundred L3 Year 2 PFP students in small group settings were told about the project and offered the chance to join it, but the response was slight. The project was then opened up to A level and first year L3 PFP students in the recognition that there would be some dropouts during the course of the project. Initial recruitment was of fourteen students: ten PFP and four A2 - PFP Year 1 (4), PFP Year 2 (6), A2 (4).

If, as initially planned, recruitment had come solely from Year 2 PFP students, it would have been possible to work within a common timetable. However, students were recruited from three different groups each with different timetables, so were unable to have a single project meeting slot. Weekly meetings lasted forty-five minutes and were run across lunchtimes, with half the group meeting on Mondays and the other half on Tuesdays. This had a knock-on impact, making it harder to build a team spirit and working relationship within the core group and between the staff and students involved. In response to this challenge, the project team (staff) worked hard to build more student identification with the project by arranging a press release to raise the project's profile. Students were given the opportunity to lead on various aspects of the project, including comparing a range of webinar platforms, identifying and contacting employers they were interested in hearing from and recruiting additional students to the project. In addition, to raise further the profile of the project for participants, certificates of recognition for completion of the moderation training and student participation were awarded within student peer groups. An evening planning session with the whole group was also run to produce the 'Top Tips' guide, with supper provided. The core group remained stable with six participants through to the end of the project.

Contact with employers

The original plan was for the student group to find and contact employers they wanted to hear from and to gather additional suggestions from their classmates. However, as time was limited during the weekly meeting, the project staff took on the role of contacting employers. Instead, the group helped draft an initial letter that was sent out to all potential employer participants. This was followed up by direct contact by one of the project staff.

Obviously timetabling webinar sessions was complex, as employer, staff, student and room availability needed to be considered if the session was to be held outside of the established core group meeting slots. At least two or three students needed to be available to moderate and chair each session and to support the employer if they were running the session at college.

Initial assessment

It is our understanding that you cannot identify what students need in terms of digital skills if you do not know what digital skills they already have or what technology they can access. An initial assessment of students' understanding of, and skills related to, webinar and video conferencing was therefore completed and background information gathered on their access to technology and employability skills. Data were collected from 256 students and full details are available on the project website (Students4webES, 2014b). A summary of the data collected on technology use is outlined in the table below. Students generally had high levels of access to technology outside college and many had prior experience of using video conferencing software such as Skype, but hardly any knew what a webinar was.

	Desktop Computer	Laptop	Smartphone	Handheld games console	Games console via TV	Internet enabled TV	Tablet	E-reader	None
What technology do you have access to outside of college?	48%	67%	63%	38%	52%	24%	20%	11%	19%

	Yes	No	No response
Do you have broadband at home?	98%	1%	1%
Have you used any video conferencing software (for example, Skype)?	78%	22%	n/a
Do you know what a webinar is?	6%	93 %	1%
Have you participated in a webinar?	2%	96%	2%

Table 1. Initial assessment of students' use of and access to technology

Outputs

Webinar recordings

There are eight recorded webinars as resources to be shown in tutorials to support the development of employability. They are available via the project blog (Students4webES, 2014a) and website (Students4webES, 2014b). All eight employers involved in the project gave signed consent for the recordings to be used for future sessions.

Student-produced guide to webinars

This was designed by the core group of students, who decided on a format that they felt would be most appealing to other students – a poster. They worked with a range of existing Jisc guides (Chatterton, 2012; Ewens, undated; Ball and Richardson, 2013 and Hanmer, 2012) and used their experience of setting up and running the employer webinars to identify the most relevant 'top tips' to include. The poster is available to download (Students4webES, 2014b).

Student-led conference

The on-campus Jisc RSC SE event 'Employability Skills and Technology: Improving Outcomes for Learners', held on 22nd April 2013, became the student-led conference. The core group of students (five out of six) attended the entire conference and actively participated in the two sessions about the project. The conference proved to be very popular with the students involved. They not only gained experience of public speaking and public recognition for their hard work, but also commented on how helpful it was to see other presenting styles and to learn from that experience.

Another group of students (five Year 1 Business students) event-managed the conference, including attending a number of pre-conference meetings with both the Project Leader and the organising team from Jisc RSC SE.

Dissemination Events with Student Participants

The project manager and two students involved in the project presented online via Blackboard Collaborate as part of the Jisc RSC SE Online Innovation Forum on 10th May 2013.

The project manager and project lead presented, with a student participating, via Skype at the Jisc RSC Event "Technology, Innovation and Success - A conference for ACL and WBL" on the 28th March 2014 at Senate House, University of London.

Lessons learned

1. As a result of this project, we have identified through the employer evaluations (Students4webES, 2014b) that being able to set up and run a webinar is a digital employability skill that would make a CV stand out in the application process. As one employer noted, *"Everyone knows that having good IT skills is important for getting a job...(webinar skills) is an unusual skill, outside the proficiency of Word and Excel and could help you in your application."* The 'soft' skills acquired through the process of learning to use a platform and to create webinars with employers were of

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considerable value to the students. 'Soft' skills included improved communication skills, collaboration, confidence in working with employers and understanding the importance of being reliable.

2. There are three concrete examples of how this project made a difference to the core student group. One student, who runs a business with his parent who is based abroad, changed from using Skype to WebEX, since it was a more professional tool, and he feels that the business has benefited. A second student spoke about the project at his university interview and felt that it played a large role in his being offered a place quickly. A third student said he learned quite a lot about employability skills from listening to the employers as he helped run the webinars. He was successful in gaining a desirable apprenticeship with a local organisation that has restricted and competitive places and he has told us that he felt that his success was down to his participation in the project.
3. Students and staff participated in the video conferencing training together. One student then volunteered to help out in all future training sessions with staff and students. (This highlights the importance/usefulness of having a mentor role for students working in partnership with staff; it gives the opportunity for students to take the lead and to gain confidence and the respect of peers and staff within the bounds of the project.) Doing so also gave ownership to this particular student, who was then committed to the project and its success.
4. It is important to include and engage students in any dissemination events when working in partnership.
5. Webinar skills are good digital employability skills. Four of the eight employers had to come to college to participate in the webinar because they weren't confident that they could use the technology at their workplace. All the employers reported that they learned important lessons from participating in the project and now see the benefit of having this skill on a CV (Students4webES, 2014b).
6. From the employer evaluation, it appears that employers are keen to support young people and the college. A number of the employers didn't know anything about a webinar but were happy to help because they had a commitment to improving student employability skills.
7. The provision of certificates for the core group of students to recognise officially the training they had completed was key to the success of the project. During the evaluation, all of the students interviewed stated that one of the main reasons for joining the project was to improve their CV or application to university. Certificates are an easy way of validating the skills gained and they had a significant motivational effect on three of the students who received them.
8. The importance of outside funding for projects in further education should be strongly emphasised. Project funding enabled the testing out of the ideas behind this project, allowing the time to do it in a structured way, from the baseline assessment through to the training provided by the Jisc RSC SE, and provided access to a high-quality platform. In times of austerity, innovation is more likely to come through funding opportunities like this rather than through reliance on a key senior individual within an organisation, who may have an idea, but limited resources. Adequate funding gave time for proper consideration of objectives, implementation of the project and reflection on the subsequent learning. To face the current challenge of constant change within education and employment, opportunities like this are useful, helpful

and instrumental in providing the wherewithal to consider possibilities and try out new ideas.

9. A further education project run by FE staff (as opposed to outside researchers coming into FE) requires a different attitude from that of higher education, since the structure in FE does not normally include research time. Financial structures, timetables of key staff, employment of those outside the organisation and promotion of student participation all need consideration and the full support of a senior management team is essential in the creation of an environment which enables the project to succeed.
10. Student participation in a project, from encouraging participation and then retaining the core student group, depends on building a group identity and offering incentives which are immediately meaningful. 'It will be good on your CV' does not appear to be as meaningful as 'When you complete the training, you will be awarded a certificate by your course tutor'.

Final thoughts

Institutional research is not part of the culture in further education and the appeal to students of participating in a research project appeared to be limited. Since working with students from different courses and across timetables was a challenge to the conventional FE student self-identity, it may have deterred many of them from creating a different identity to meet this (to them) unusual approach. Furthermore, since neither of the researchers directly taught or tutored the students involved, their apparently uncertain status restricted their powers of persuasion. That said, the students who did stay the course gained a great deal and demonstrated new leadership and team-working skills by the end of the project. Working with their strengths and encouraging them to develop their understanding proved to be more achievable in a smaller group where they were well known.

This small project thus identifies some of the differences (and illustrates the attendant difficulties) between working with FE students and working with HE students in learner-led projects; however, it also confirms how staff/student partnership can be hugely beneficial to both students *and* staff.

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