

### **‘Mission Employable’: Creating a student-led employability strategy for the Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton**

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#### **Introduction**

This paper is the case study of a project undertaken over summer 2014 by Dr Eleanor Quince (Director of Employability) and student interns Charlotte Medland, Verity Smith, Amber Dudley and James Tribe at the University of Southampton in the Faculty of Humanities. The Faculty hosts over 3,000 students studying single or combined degrees across seven disciplines: Archaeology, English, Film, History, Modern Languages, Music and Philosophy. Our internship remit was to create and launch a new student-led employability strategy for the Faculty of Humanities. The strategy needed to be both engaging and flexible, with tailored options for each of the seven disciplines.

Evidence shows that, in an increasingly competitive job market, graduate recruiters are looking for more than just subject knowledge (Allan, 2006). Employers want driven and articulate individuals with a passion for learning; they want employees who can use their repertoire of transferable skills to make a valuable impact from the moment they take their very first steps on the company’s premises (Graduate Recruiters, 2013). Humanities students from the University of Southampton fit this mould, but many fail to appreciate just how employable they are. This is partly because many Humanities students struggle to push past the misconception that graduates with Humanities degrees are not as employable as their more specialised or vocationally-trained peers. Internal research carried out by Career Destinations, the University of Southampton’s careers service, showed that some students did not feel that they were in a position to apply for graduate jobs at the end of their second year of study. Coming at a time when many companies are opening their graduate schemes to applications earlier, to attract the very best candidates, this reflects negatively on our students. Not only are the recruitment processes starting earlier, but large graduate recruiters are also hiring on a first-come-first-serve basis, meaning that students need to apply as soon as the application process opens.

These concerns highlight the need for career guidance and employability to be ingrained in the student experience from the very beginning of degree programmes. Furthermore, such guidance must be implemented in a way that not only raises students’ awareness of the importance of employability, but also provides them with the necessary skills, knowledge and resources to make the successful transition from Higher Education to the world of work.

In recent years, the Faculty of Humanities has explored numerous methods of raising students’ awareness of the importance of employability. This has included staging a number of optional careers events and embedding short talks into existing modules. The former suffered from low attendance and engagement and the latter from the problem of creating sessions which imparted advice and guidance from the careers service whilst also linking directly to what students were studying at the given point.

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Dr Quince having suggested that the best way to revolutionise the Employability agenda within Humanities would be to give the power for change to the students, the four authors of this paper were selected by rigorous application and interview process to work as interns on the University's Excel Placement Programme for twelve weeks over summer 2014; we each had experience from across the Faculty at all levels of study. The plan was for us to collaborate with Faculty and University partners to develop and implement Dr Quince's initial proposals.

The core of the new employability activity needed the attention of two of the interns, who collaborated with Career Destinations and Faculty staff to create content for a compulsory undergraduate first-year Employability Module. This module would be a pilot; the intention was to create equivalent modules for second- and final-year students in successive academic years. The two interns would also share responsibility for launching a VIP Alumni Scheme and External Advisory Board (EAB), which together would encourage greater employer engagement with the Faculty and build lasting links with our students, as well as having the potential to provide additional experience opportunities. Another student intern would focus on creating a Faculty-wide Peer Mentoring Scheme, encouraging the swift integration of, and uptake of opportunities by, new students, while simultaneously developing the transferable skills of the current students acting as mentors. The fourth intern would undertake research on Group Activity at national, institutional and Faculty-level, to result in a recommendations report to the Faculty in semester one. In addition, this intern would use the research to begin creating a reflective 'tool' for use by students after they had taken part in employability-related activity in a curricular or extra-curricular environment. By means of this tool, students could develop mini 'case studies' to evidence their transferable skills to potential employers.

With the exception of some aspects of the Employability Module and Group Activity research, these initiatives were created, led and developed by the student interns. We were given the freedom to innovate, designing the delivery of employability training in a creative and student-led way. The outcomes of this process will be discussed in more detail later.

Finally, all four interns would contribute to a University-wide initiative called the Southampton Opportunity Project. Working in partnership with fourteen other student interns from across the University of Southampton's eight faculties, the Humanities team would research and create opportunity profiles for 'OPUS', the Opportunity Profiles of the University of Southampton website. This website would showcase the range of activities at curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular levels already in existence at the University and would demonstrate the employability skills that students developed by taking part in each activity. The site would be launched in semester one of the 2014-15 academic year in a beta version (visit [www.soton.ac.uk/opus](http://www.soton.ac.uk/opus)), before the team acted on student feedback and launched the final version in semester two.

### Practice

From the start, we were really motivated by staff enthusiasm and willingness to contribute, at both University and Faculty-level. This enthusiasm really helped us to move quickly to create new initiatives and ensure that they would be appropriate for all of Southampton's Humanities disciplines. However, the range and number of opportunities for Humanities

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students, and the many different ways in which our students could engage with these activities, led to our decision within the first month to add two new tasks to the project.

Firstly, we decided to create a 'brand' that would bring together all the new and existing employability activity under one umbrella. This was born of our ever-increasing awareness that all the activity was interconnected, an awareness we wanted to ensure students had from their arrival in Humanities. To make the initiatives as student-friendly and accessible as possible, we decided to name the brand 'Mission Employable'. We established Mission Employable through a team blog over the summer (<https://blog.soton.ac.uk/missionemployable/>), where we continue to document our progress. Recognising that keeping Faculty colleagues informed of our activity was essential, we kept staff abreast of developments by means of a regular Faculty newsletter, with input both from us and our creative partners (<https://blog.soton.ac.uk/missionemployable/newsletters/>). Day-to-day publicity and awareness of the new initiatives was managed through a Twitter account ([www.twitter.com/HumsEmployable](http://www.twitter.com/HumsEmployable)). We now also manage student awareness through a Facebook page, launched in September 2014 ([www.facebook.com/missionemployable](http://www.facebook.com/missionemployable)).

Secondly, we became conscious that the amount of new activity being launched would need continued monitoring throughout the coming year and we decided that the best way to do this would be through the creation of a 'Mission Employable Working Group'. We decided on this format as it met our plans to give students the power to review, evaluate and provide feedback on the new Mission Employable initiatives, ensuring that all future developments would continue to be made in direct consultation with students. Moreover, the Group would become the central forum for the sharing of new ideas for student-led activity across the Faculty and would be the site of initial planning to bring these ideas to fruition.

We felt that a Working Group would reflect the open, collaborative environment we wished to create to encourage student engagement in the Mission Employable initiatives, emphasising to our peers that the Faculty wanted to put the capacity for change in teaching and learning in our hands: How did they want to learn? Would they prefer a practical approach, alongside a more formal teaching style that allowed them to take home key tips? Questions like these would be put to the Group to enable them to lead on the development of the Employability Module in future years, as well as the associated Mission Employable activity. The Group would also be encouraged to forge working partnerships with other students and organisations from across the University to establish a sustainable student employability network. (This is already being achieved through Mission Employable's close relationship with the University's iChamps initiative (Harvey, 2015).)

### **The HUMA1036 Employability Module**

In collaboration with the University's Career Destinations team, we created the lecture content for four compulsory first-year employability lectures, to run across the academic year for all first-year Humanities students. Working in partnership with Career Destinations, we were able to demonstrate our aim to engage students through the use of interactive teaching methods. We felt this was key to engaging and motivating students who would be taught in large lecture theatres, where individual lecturer-student interaction is difficult to create. Similarly, we were able to ensure through our collaborative module structure that students were learning from all their experiences while at University, including how best to engage them in personal and professional development opportunities.

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Part of the teaching and learning innovation we achieved was through the many different platforms that students would be able to use as part of the module. Alongside the four lectures - which would consist mostly of the delivery of core information and skills, with a percentage of the content tailored to the academic discipline and its associated career paths - students would be able to access the module via the e-learning portal Blackboard. The module site would not only provide supplementary materials, but also produce resources for each individual department within the Faculty of Humanities. It would also link to other Mission Employable channels such as the social media feeds and the OPUS website, enabling students to research their personal career preferences and alter their activity outside the classroom to reflect their areas for professional development.

The module was launched in early October 2014, delivered by Career Destinations and with additional activity and materials supplied by the Faculty of Humanities and Mission Employable. So far, the students' response has been positive. The module was reviewed for the first time in mid-November as part of the Mission Employable Working Group, with suggested changes implemented before the beginning of semester two.

### **External Advisory Board and VIP Alumni Scheme**

We created two new ventures for the Faculty, complementary to the module, as a means of facilitating closer student working with employers and alumni (*The Guardian*, 2014). The first of these was an External Advisory Board (EAB).

We evaluated employer type to decide what would be most appropriate, as we wanted a range of careers to be represented and found it was difficult to decide between them, since Humanities leads to such a range of possible employment routes. We decided that the Board would work on two levels, to accommodate as many employers as possible. There would be a core board, whose members would take an active role in advising the Faculty on a range of enterprises, including employability and research activity, and a wider network whose members would be invited to participate in events and activities. We established terms of reference to define the roles of the Board and explain its aims and benefits to potential members. As the appropriate promotion of the EAB to potential board members was very important, we also created a booklet providing an overview of the Faculty, its education and research activity and the aims of Mission Employable.

The second venture was a VIP Alumni scheme (now called the Humanities Alumni Network to reflect its collaborative nature). Based on our own experiences, we wanted to increase alumni involvement with current students to raise awareness of the importance of developing employability skills during a degree. We began collating a list of alumni who had graduated no more than ten years ago and who were now in careers that used the skills developed through their Humanities degrees. We felt strongly that a ten-year cut-off point would ensure that the alumni would be able to relate to current students (Quince, 2014). To achieve this task, we also worked closely with the University's Office of Development and Alumni Relations (ODAR), searching their databases for alumni who would be suitable candidates for the scheme. To help with launching the Network, we decided to give alumni the option to contribute remotely. One of the methods used to achieve this was the professional social network LinkedIn, as some University of Southampton Alumni Groups already existed through this site. We created departmental groups where needed, and asked Faculty staff to publicise this to their alumni. (This has enabled the online networks to grow rapidly, and

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current students can now join the groups through the Employability Module Blackboard site to engage with former students and request advice and guidance. We have also publicised the sites through our Twitter and Facebook accounts, and through the Working Group.) Alumni were made aware of the requirement to respond to student contacts should they join a LinkedIn Alumni Group through an Alumni Terms of Reference document, which was distributed alongside all invitations.

### **Humanities Peer Mentoring**

At the very beginning of the summer period, we began researching what peer support schemes were already in place within the University and what could be learnt from examples at other universities. Through an identification of best practice (University of Leeds, 2010), we were able to develop a plan for our own scheme and how it would be implemented during the 2014/15 academic year.

As a team, we decided early on that we did not want to create a paid scheme, but instead that we would motivate current students to participate as mentors by stressing how they would be helping new starters. We also preferred the concept of group mentoring, with a pair of mentors from each discipline helping no more than fifteen mentees. The mentors would be paired by mixing different levels of study, so that mentees could learn from their range of experiences. This model struck the right balance between a relaxed scheme that would not be daunting for the mentees, but would give the mentors the option to give personalised advice when required. The meetings would be held every two weeks throughout semester one, with extra or one-to-one meetings held at the discretion of the mentors. All incoming Humanities students would be enrolled onto the scheme unless they chose to opt out either at their first meeting or via email.

Mentors were recruited through iSurvey, an online application form, which was then reviewed by all of us to choose the successful candidates. In all, 168 mentors were appointed for the inaugural year of the scheme.

Two elements were crucial to the success of the scheme: a student-led training session for the mentors, enabling them to understand their role and develop their skills set, and a Mentor Handbook to complement their training with a list of essential contacts and additional sources of support (Newcastle University, 2013). It was also essential that the scheme was properly evaluated and reviewed during its pilot year. We decided that two formal reviews would be required at the mid- and end-points of the scheme. In addition, following their fortnightly meetings with their mentees, mentors would send informal reports to the student Peer Mentoring Coordinator so that the scheme could be regularly monitored for both improvement and successes. In this way, we have remained flexible in our development of the scheme for subsequent years, while our mentors have been at the centre of the change process throughout the scheme. In fact, so many mentors have shared with us their ideas and recommendations for the future that we are currently encouraging them to apply for summer internships to develop the scheme for its second year.

### **Group Activity Recommendations Report**

Many of the new Mission Employable initiatives would incorporate Group Activity in some form. For this reason, one of us focused on researching this area within UK Higher Education, ensuring that the activities implemented by the Faculty of Humanities were

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student-led wherever possible, in accordance with our initial proposal for students as agents of change to incorporate innovative teaching and learning methods (Buckley, 2013).

We researched Higher Education (HE) Group Activity at a national level, exploring work by organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the National Union of Students (NUS). The focus then moved to HEIs, in particular the University of Southampton's fellow Russell Group institutions. We then addressed the University of Southampton's current use of Group Activity and met with colleagues in other departments to discuss how best practice might be adjusted to work for Humanities students. Finally, the research centred on the Faculty itself, interviewing staff and researching each department to discover what Group Activity was already happening within the Faculty and how this might be opened up to as many Humanities students as possible. We created a Group Activity Recommendations report for sharing with the Faculty's Programme Committee. The central findings of this report recommended:

- greater creativity with group work in classroom situations;
- a greater need to place the focus of the learning outcomes on the students: independent learning is much more successful if the students understand clearly from the outset what achievements they are working towards;
- harnessing enthusiasm: rather than teaching group activity in the more traditional, passive manner, teachers should be actively engaging with students and the resources they will require to succeed, sharing enthusiasm for the topic and instilling positive motivation within the students.

During the Group Activity research, we noticed that many of the institutions with successful Group Activity initiatives were cementing the student experience with a reflective exercise, so that the students could immediately record how they had developed as a result of the activity and how this might benefit them. The team was unanimous in the opinion that a similar process to capture learning outcomes should be available to all students involved in Mission Employable. It was decided that the tool should take two forms: a quick online 'quiz' style survey for students to record their experience while still fresh in their minds and an end-of-activity 'case study' to showcase the employability skills used and developed through each activity and demonstrate their value to potential employers. (This tool is still in development, and we are aiming to launch it for the 2015-16 academic year.)

### **Reflections: How we will move forward with Mission Employable**

Given the breadth of the new initiatives we were launching in 2014-15, we decided on the Mission Employable Working Group as the best means of keeping our students at the centre of employability provision.

The Working Group facilitates the launch of the new initiatives, encourages participation in them, tracks student feedback and reviews all activity before developing the content for second- and final-year modules in 2015-16. The Working Group is the point of review for the Employability Module and Peer Mentoring scheme and leads all complementary activity under the Mission Employable brand. As the Peer Mentoring scheme and complementary activities enable the second- and final-year students to participate in the new initiatives during the launch year, we invited Group representatives from each Humanities discipline student society, the Humanities first-year Course Representatives, postgraduate

representatives, the Mission Employable team and Career Destinations staff. This empowers our students to use both existing and new resources to develop their own employability skills through organising their own events and making valuable external contacts.

In conclusion, we have been hugely motivated by the success of Mission Employable so far. The two of us who stayed on to implement the initiatives have seen Humanities students embrace these tools to create their own future career opportunities. We are now forming partnerships with even more students through the feedback and review processes for the new initiatives and our hope is that they will take up the opportunity to be agents of change for their peers as we move on.

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