A robust methodology for tracking and evaluating student engagement

Simon Allington, Jake Hibberd, Dawn Lees, Amanda Pocklington
University of Exeter

Introduction

The exclusion of student engagement metrics in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) raises concerns for sector practitioners. Specifically, consistent and robust data to evaluate the impact of engagement activities on students' learning is lacking (Kandiko Howson and Buckley, 2016). Restructuring at the University of Exeter aligning student engagement activities alongside the Careers Service, has provided an opportunity to adapt an existing software package, *CareerHub,* to track and evaluate student engagement.

CareerHub was originally developed at Griffith University to streamline the operation of the Careers Service (Dee Hughes, *pers comm,* 2017). It was designed to manage placement opportunities, appointments with careers consultants, resources and booking places on events (www.careerhub.info). Ca*reerHub*'s 'workflow' functionality allows activities to be grouped into a prescribed chronological process, with pre- and co-requisite options programmed, to ensure that students complete each of the criteria in the correct order for accredited activities. Students access an individualised workflow for each activity by an easy-to-use interface which automatically guides them through every stage. This also streamlines the process for staff and removes a major administrative burden.

Background

CareerHub's workflow function was already established at Exeter for managing the institution's employability award, the Exeter Award (www.exeter.ac.uk/exeteraward). Following restructuring of staff, *CareerHub* was adapted in order to manage two established student engagement programmes: 'Students as Change Agents' (SaCA) and Peer Support. SaCA enables students to lead projects relating to education enhancement (Kay, Dunne and Hutchison, 2010); Peer Support facilitates student peer mentoring and study support in an informal environment (Ody and Carey, 2013).

Both programmes involve a wide range of academic and professional services staff and had previously been heavily paper-based, with the consequent administrative load increasing the likelihood of errors and unreliable data, and making engagement levels difficult to verify and analyse. The expansion of the HEAR (www.exeter.ac.uk/hear) to include these programmes drove improvement of the existing administrative processes. *CareerHub's* workflow functionality offered many programme management enhancements, including embedding employability, communication with students and collecting data on engagement levels.

Enriched training

The workflow has enabled a blended learning approach for Peer Mentor and SaCA training; these are similar in structure. Figure 1 shows an example workflow for Peer Leaders.

AUTOMATED SYSTEM ACTIONS
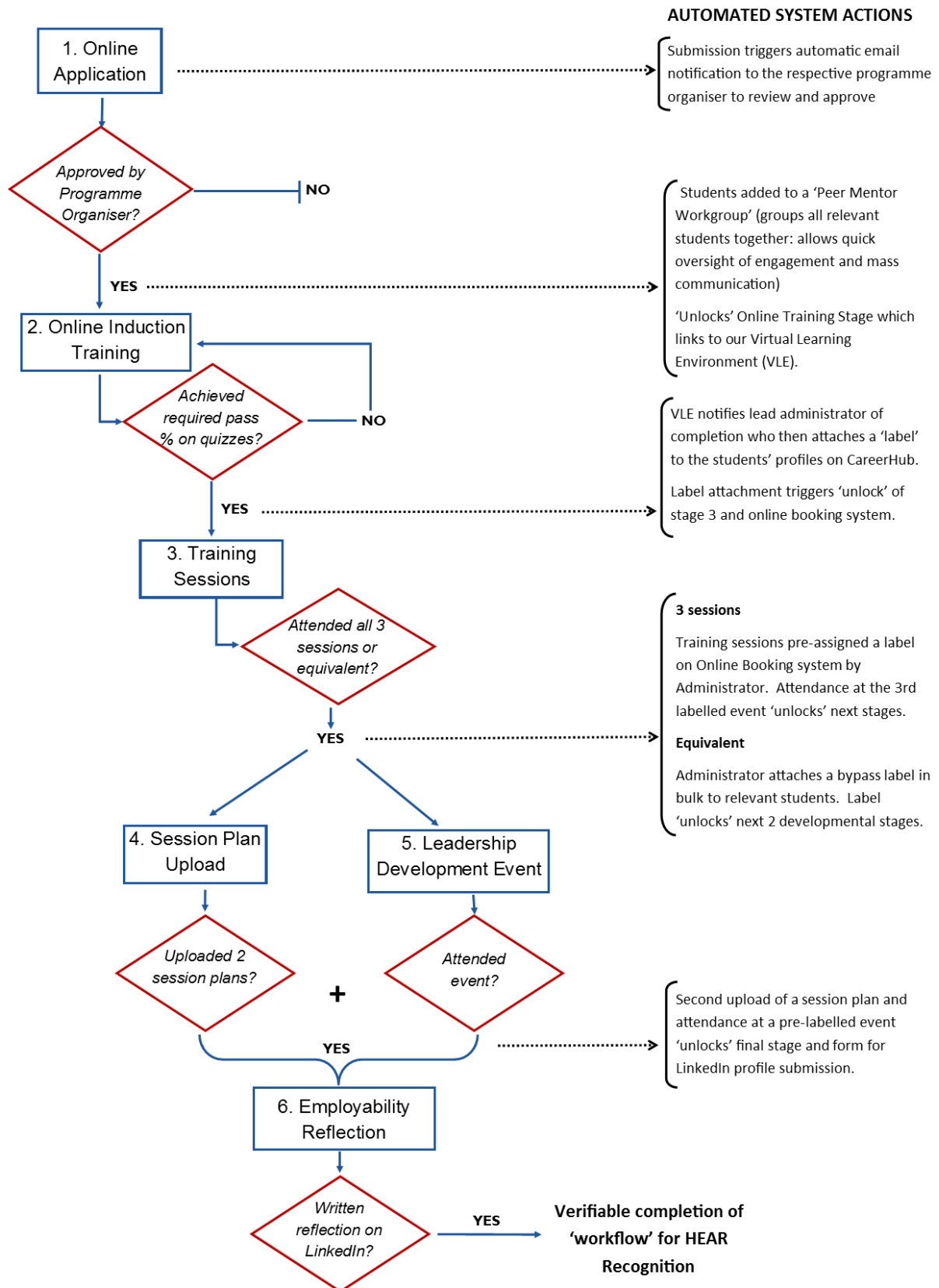
1. Online Application
⟶ Submission triggers automatic email notification to the respective programme organiser to review and approve

Approved by Programme Organiser? — NO

YES ⟶ Students added to a 'Peer Mentor Workgroup' (groups all relevant students together: allows quick oversight of engagement and mass communication)

2. Online Induction Training

'Unlocks' Online Training Stage which links to our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Achieved required pass % on quizzes? — NO

VLE notifies lead administrator of completion who then attaches a 'label' to the students' profiles on CareerHub.

YES ⟶ Label attachment triggers 'unlock' of stage 3 and online booking system.

3. Training Sessions

Attended all 3 sessions or equivalent?

3 sessions

Training sessions pre-assigned a label on Online Booking system by Administrator. Attendance at the 3rd labelled event 'unlocks' next stages.

Equivalent

Administrator attaches a bypass label in bulk to relevant students. Label 'unlocks' next 2 developmental stages.

YES

4. Session Plan Upload   **5. Leadership Development Event**

Uploaded 2 session plans?   **+**   **Attended event?**

YES

Second upload of a session plan and attendance at a pre-labelled event 'unlocks' final stage and form for LinkedIn profile submission.

6. Employability Reflection

Written reflection on LinkedIn? — YES ⟶ **Verifiable completion of 'workflow' for HEAR Recognition**

Figure 1. Stages of Peer Learning workflow

Students are directed to an online induction course housed in our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The administrator is notified when students pass the course and 'labels' are attached to their *CareerHub* profiles, thereby 'unlocking' bookable face-to-face training events. Face-to-face training is now more practical and students attend with enhanced prior knowledge. Training is also more closely aligned with employability development.

Chronological process with embedded skills development

CareerHub provides a platform for us to embed developmental and employability-focused activities within student engagement, thereby fostering a richer learning experience.

For SaCA activities, students upload project proposals, risk assessments, financial plans and sustainability proposals to produce a developmental portfolio. For Peer Learning, students upload session plans, book on to development workshops and upload reflections via LinkedIn on the impact of their role on employability development.

This visible chronology of developmental stages gives students a greater sense of ownership of the process. They can see their progression in their workflow, engage in a way that suits their timetable and be aware of how much they have left to do, thus encouraging independent learning whilst furthering leadership and organisational skills.

"The visual layout is helpful due to how busy the trainee mentors are with university commitments…it was easy to see which tasks had been missed in order to rectify the situation" (Peer Mentor).

Staff are able to assess the effectiveness of the training delivered; for example, the 'session plan upload' stage follows the training stage in which session planning is taught (Figure 1). The workflow also "*provides a more structured, robust and consistent means of capturing the impact and evaluation of Change Agent projects*" (Student Engagement Officer).

HEAR recognition

For Student Engagement initiatives to be recognised on students' Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), student involvement must be verified by staff. For Peer Learning, this involved administrator liaison with over twenty discipline-based colleagues, requiring them to digitise their paper records and submit them for processing. The workflow now automatically compiles a list of entitled students (i.e. those who have completed it), saving over fifty-five hours of administration time. It also gives parity to pastoral programmes, which were more difficult to record and were therefore not previously recognised on HEAR.

Limitations and proposed developments

Despite bringing numerous benefits, the complex and intricate programming necessary to create each workflow demands a significant investment of time. Academic staff new to the system have viewed as prohibitive the initial investment of time in learning how to use the workflows, but, once guided through the process, have been receptive to the advantages it brings.

There are some limitations to the usability of *CareerHub.* Specifically, students can have only one active workflow per programme at a time. This does not affect many students, but means students who are peer mentors on more than one programme, or have two SaCA projects running simultaneously, cannot record them both. Likewise, such administrative tasks as approving uploaded documents cannot be delegated to student leaders since software criteria restrict these to staff only. In terms of processing students' uploaded documents for projects and peer programmes, *CareerHub* does not currently have a marking and annotating function, as offered by online assessment software like *Turnitin,* to provide a more streamlined two-way dialogue over students' work.

Conclusion

CareerHub can work as a digital solution to create a more efficient and streamlined system to support student engagement programmes for staff and students. The functionality has enabled more consistent, robust and reliable data to be captured about the impact of these programmes, both to inform institutional strategic planning and to recognise students' development and achievements. These data enable us to evaluate critically the impact of these programmes and to continue to refine and develop them.

CareerHub is not without limitations and it is important to remember that, while systems like it can be used to consolidate and facilitate student engagement and partnership, these programmes should be carefully structured in the first place and staff need a thorough understanding of the challenges that using *CareerHub* aims to resolve.

Acknowledgements

Reference list

Kandiko Howson, C and Buckley, A (2016) 'Development of the UK engagement survey.' *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2016.1235134 (Accessed: 7 February 2017).

Kay, J. Dunne, E. and Hutchison, J. (2010) *Rethinking the values of higher education – students as change agents?* Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1193/1/StudentsChangeAgents.pdf (Accessed: 7 February 2017).

Ody, M. and Carey, W. (2013) 'Peer Education.' In: Dunne, E. and Owen D. (eds.) *Student Engagement Handbook: Practice in Higher Education*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 291-312 (Chapter 17).