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Building a Business Clinic in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges for students’ skills development

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Building a Business Clinic in Higher Education: opportunities and challenges for students’ skills development

Abstract

This article reports on research conducted on students’ skills development in a Business Clinic setting in a post-1992 university. Framed within the ‘understanding, skills, efficacy and meta-cognition model (USEM)’ of Knight and Yorke (2003) the findings offered insight into students’ professional development on live projects and revealed the opportunities and challenges for the university. In an already crowded curriculum, academic staff welcomed the initiative. A key challenge for the university was how to ensure that the value of academic knowledge could be retained, within the necessity to provide students with practical, vocational skills development. While ensuring rigorous evaluation procedures for both the employers and the students, further challenges surrounded the complexities of integrating live projects into the current pedagogical structure. The opportunities, however, were positive, resulting in new business links with local employers, whereby partnerships for business engagement and opportunities for students’ internships/placements commenced.

Keywords: students skills development, business clinic, programme learning outcomes, employment skills

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Authorship statement

We confirm this is our own work and the article has not been submitted for review to any other journal.

Dr D. Watson and Dr L. A. Barkas

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**Introduction**

In response to the Recommendation 21 of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (NCIHE 1997), universities endeavoured to provide a statement of outcomes for each programme of study. These learning outcomes describe the knowledge and understanding, key, cognitive and subject specific skills that students should develop during their degree programmes. During the 1990s and to the present day, the emphasis on students developing transferable employment skills has gained prominence in the policy literature on graduate employability (HEA, 2017). The researched university, given the pseudonym *University of Aspiration*, responded in the same way as other similar institutions, by implementing initiatives to provide this practical business experience. The business skills projects were either embedded in modules or offered alongside existing programmes of study.

**What is a Business Clinic?**

The research study presented in this article reports on one of these employment skills development initiatives in the form of a Business Clinic. It was set up alongside the programmes of study, to provide practical business skills to under-graduate and post-graduate students. In the research project, the ‘understanding, skills, efficacy and meta-cognition model’ (USEM) developed by Knight and Yorke (2003) was applied and the resulting issues are discussed.

In response to widening participation over the past twenty years, the use of open workshops, drop-in study/careers advise sessions, surgeries and ‘clinic models’ offering academic and professional skills support to students, emerged in universities (Barkas
2011; HEA 2017; Robinson and Hilli, 2016; Wilkins and Burke, 2013). Along with other universities in the sector, at University of Aspiration, clinic models were developed for law programmes and so the prospect of creating a similar business clinic became a practical reality that emerged from previous consultations. The issues identified in the start-up of the clinic are reported in detail elsewhere (Watson, Hall and Tazzyman, 2016) but were fundamentally related to problems in terms of lack of investment and difficulties in providing academic staff to work full-time in the clinic. The findings in this article focus on the practical nature of supporting students’ professional skills development within the academic pedagogical model.

Academic staff were supportive of the Business Clinic model and believed it could provide an innovative mechanism in which students’ employability skills could be addressed. A key challenge for the university, however, related to how to find room and time in the academic curriculum for additional projects that provided students with practical, vocational skills development. Further challenges surround the complexities of integrating live projects into the current pedagogical structure; while also ensuring confidential, rigorous evaluation procedures for both the employers and the students.

The challenges for the University staff therefore, centred on how best to ensure the expectations of the employers could be fully addressed through student-led projects.

Profile of the university and background.

University of Aspiration is in a region in England where there are several other medium-sized higher education institutions. It also has different partners overseas. With a strong
heritage in practical and technical subjects, it has endeavoured to continue to develop as a teaching-institution rather than a research-focussed university.

The ‘understanding, skills, efficacy and meta-cognition model’ (USEM) developed by Knight and Yorke (2003) was utilised in the research from within a qualitative methodology to explore the development of students’ skills in the Business Clinic.

**Methodology**

The study was undertaken in response to the 2011, Education and Skills Survey Report *Building for Growth* and as part of several of the University’s employability initiatives. A qualitative study (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) within a participatory action-research framework, as defined by McTaggart (1997) in a case study setting (Yin, 1994) was undertaken. The formal research period was 5 years, with the preliminary research process taking place in year 1, in two parallel phases as follows:

**Year One: Phase 1**

The initial idea surrounding ways to work with local businesses was supported by the North East Federation of Small Business and a local High Street Bank, who contributed a sum totalling £1500. The start-up costs were met by the Faculty and this additional investment paid for some administration time, marketing and a contribution to the hospitality provided by *University of Aspiration*. 2000 flyers detailing the plans for the Business Clinic were sent out both electronically and by post to sole traders, small and medium enterprises (on average 50 employees) and larger international companies with offices in the region. 50 responses were received materialising in attendance of over 50
company representatives at six business breakfasts, followed by a further six seminars.
Although 50 responses out of 2000, was very low, once the clinic was operational, a total of 160 companies that did not reply formally, came forward with additional enquiries.

From these events and some related networking, the first phase concentrated on establishing the need for a business clinic and clarifying what sort of projects may emerge. 10 academic staff formed four focus groups to divide the employers’ needs/queries into four different sectors; management; innovation and enterprise; supply chain operations and marketing.

**Year One: Phase 2**

To establish the practical needs of the Business Clinic, the second phase of year one consisted of cross-team collaboration meetings with local employers. The issues around possible projects that emerged from the business awareness sessions were grouped across four different areas of business: management, innovation and enterprise, supply chain operations and marketing. A detailed analysis is reported elsewhere, (Watson, Hall and Tazzyman 2016) but is summarised below in Table 1.
Table 1. Examples of The Business Issues/Employers’ questions that emerged from the employer awareness sessions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Innovation and Enterprise</th>
<th>Supply Chain Operations</th>
<th>Marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A key concern for employers related to identifying which aspects of management were possible for students to work on in a clinic setting</td>
<td>Employers were concerned about enterprise development. They questioned how they could retain competitive advantage but still share creative and innovation ideas.</td>
<td>Supply pricing and operations are key to business success – employers in this sector were concerned about which parts of these operations could be addressed in the clinic?</td>
<td>Issues in marketing include innovation, digital marketing and enterprise and are equally competitive – how can the students in the Business Clinic help?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the employers’ awareness sessions, there were also 4 other areas of concern, noted as follows: -

1. Employers were uncertain about how best to approach the university for help.
2. The university was viewed as a teaching and research institute only, without any links to local employers.
3. Employers did not know the university could access funding for business support.
4. A general perception that lecturers were employed only to teach and to conduct research.

Although the enquiries started well, they were less forthcoming in year 5; however, three the projects did develop into long-term business relationships with the University. These were a local Health Care Trust, a Housing association and a specialist consultancy company.

**Research findings**
The following 3 case studies reflect how the Business Clinic experience on live projects helped the students’ professional skills development. The case studies were framed against Knight and Yorke’s (2003) ‘understanding, skills, efficacy and metacognition model’ (USEM). The case studies served two purposes. The first, was the provision of student’ skills development in real company projects, and the second purpose was the individual student had to prepare a reflective commentary how their contribution and experience had helped them develop their own employment skills.

Examples of the case studies – applying USEM (Knight and Yorke 2003).

1. Understanding – Client 1: Housing Group
2. Skill development - crossed all the case studies
3. Meta-cognition- Client 2: Foundation Trust of the National Health Service
4. Self-efficacy- Client 3: The International Transformational Change Consultancy

**Client: Organisation 1: Housing Group**

**Part One – Research to improve staff motivation**

The client was a Housing Group with over 1600 employees. They asked the university for help in finding new ways to improve staff motivation. The students had to research the company, meet with employees and present their recommendations to Senior Management in a formal business report. A schedule was organised, and 54 undergraduate students worked in teams of 4 to 5 members. An academic member of staff supervised the students’ activities. During the site visit the client’s staff stated that they found that the students were well prepared in terms of knowledge about the housing groups business. The Housing Group Deputy Director said that “I thought the student’s
contribution was fantastic and the insight they made from only a day with us was amazing. It was a privilege to be involved in such a project. The project was enormously valuable and there were at least four recommendations that the visiting students came up with which we will be taking back and implementing in the workplace.” This was seconded by the Housing Group Head of Property who added:

“'There was value in the project for the Housing Group to get an external independent view on a sensitive issue and the students saw value in working with a large organisation and addressing practical issues.'”

**Part Two – Students’ focus on ‘understanding of motivation’ of USEM (Knight and Yorke, 2003)**

The students’ skills development in this project was to focus on their primary skill of ‘understanding’, identifying factors for and against current levels of motivation. They then had to make commercially viable recommendations, based on their understanding of the situation at the time. As part of their module assessment, students were also required to submit a reflective commentary on how they felt they had developed key employment skills, with a focus on the skill of understanding the requirements of this specific project.

**Positive aspects of the project experience**

The students said they had enjoyed working on the real project, feeling that they had gained an insight into the real business of the Housing Group. They also noted how they believed their communication skills and team working had improved.

**Negative aspects of the project experience**
While the students stated they found the experiences highly rewarding in terms of their understanding of commercial organisations, they expressed concern that all members of the team did not fully engage in the task and their individual contributions were not fully recognised. There was no individual assessment on their performance other than generic group feedback.

The academic staff were concerned that although the team dynamics were generally positive, as the project was outside of the learning outcomes of existing modules, the impact of individual performance could not be evaluated, and this highlighted one of the main limitations of the ‘student-team’ approach to the projects. At the end of the academic year, the academic staff involved, proposed the development of a new project-based module, whereby individual contributions to team work would be included in the learning outcomes.

**Client: Organisation 2: National Health Service Foundation Trust**

**Part One – Students’ research to encourage staff to find alternative means of transport to work rather than use their cards and a ‘green’ advertising campaign**

In Year 2 of the research study, two students’ projects were undertaken for a local hospital. These two projects were part of an environmental, ‘green campaign’ for a Foundation Trust of the National Health Service. Firstly, students had to conduct research and report on their findings and secondly, they had to design a ‘green campaign’ to encourage staff not to use their cars to go into work.

Project 1 – Students were invited to research what factors prevented the hospital’s 1300 staff from walking, cycling, or using public transport, rather than their own cars to get
into work. Mentored by an academic member of staff, 84 post graduate students formed 12 teams of 7 members to conduct the research. They designed questionnaires and conducted interviews with the hospital staff, presenting their findings in a report to the Hospital’s Senior Management Team.

Project 2 - students were asked to design a logo for the ‘Green campaign’

This project involved the 84 post-graduate students who were subsequently joined by a further group of 17 students who expressed an interest in the design of the campaign logo. The Hospital’s Senior Management Team awarded a cash prize of £600.00 to the winning team. The Senior Managers were pleased with the students’ work and an HR manager commented: “We were initially quite apprehensive as normally, we seek external commercial support, however the students delivered, and their professionalism, competence and creativity were exceptional. We will certainly be utilising students in future projects and feel that the students also benefited in terms of employability.”

Another NHS Manager said: “The students demonstrated good organisational skills throughout the exercise, it was quite evident and reassuring that their academic programmes had provided the students key skills and competencies to work as a team and produce excellent results.”

Part Two: Students’ focus on ‘meta-cognitive skills’ of USEM (Knight and Yorke, 2003)

The students’ skills focus on these two projects was the development of their ‘meta-cognitive skills. They had to demonstrate they could adapt themselves to a professional environment. This meant they had to apply their inter-personal and team building skills in planning, research and time management
Positive aspects of the project experience

The students said they felt that the exposure to the two projects reinforced their confidence levels in terms of commercial understanding and ability to provide viable solutions to live organisational challenges.

Negative aspects of the project experience

Many of the students did express the view that they underestimated the level of the ‘out of class’ time needed to complete the tasks such as ‘juggling’ interviews/meetings around what they considered inflexible timetables. They also felt that a greater module assessment/credit rating should have been awarded in recognition for their efforts. This was particularly relevant with the ‘Design a Logo’ project as summarised by a student who said, “It was demanding but highly rewarding in terms of commercial exposure – research skills and strengthening my employability portfolio, however, given the volume of work the assessment weighting should have reflected this.”

This project demanded a high level of input from the academic staff who volunteered the extra time required to support the students. They organised bespoke seminars and workshops, including a one-day induction to ensure that the students fully understood the requirements of the projects. They also supervised the research process. For the participating students, this project replaced the module’s approved assessment, so the staff also had to map the tasks in the project against the learning outcomes of the other students’ module assessment.
Client 3 Organisation 3: International Transformational Change Consultancy Group

Students’ focus on ‘self-efficacy’ of USEM (Knight and Yorke, 2003)

Founded in 1999, the consultancy company provides a portfolio of coaching, innovation and transformational change services to businesses. The organisation’s head office is city based and has a workforce of over 50 personnel based in the UK with associates located throughout the world. The Chief Executive Officer and the Academic Manager of the Business Clinic designed a four-day innovation programme for Masters’ students. The aim of the programme was to provide students with guidance on how to present themselves when applying for business projects with major clients. The primary students’ skills were based around the skill of ‘efficacy’ that is, how to achieve the best possible results. The consultants offered insights and key models gained from their practical transformational experience, then the students were invited to apply the concepts and form teams to review real business projects. The students would then choose one project to focus on to prepare a formal presentation. They had to analyse the client’s requirements and propose an innovative way in which the company could develop. The student teams competed against each other, with the team judged to be the best gaining a cash prize. All students received a University Certificate of Achievement. Over the past five years, over 100 students benefited from the transformational business skills development training.

The presentations were all video-recorded and captured the rich, student learning experience. The professional nature of the presentations meant that the University could use them in their marketing of the Masters’ programmes. Students stated that their experiences in the four-day workshop had been ‘life changing’ in terms of improving
self-efficacy. They said the workshop had helped them understand the relevance of their modules to commercial practice. Participating in the four-day personal development programme had also helped them improve their interpersonal skills and strengthen their belief in themselves as future managers.

**Summary of students’ skills development against ‘understanding, skills, efficacy and meta-cognition model (USEM) (Knight and Yorke 2003)**

The opportunities and benefits of the Business Clinic projects were fundamentally related to how much the students’ engaged with the activities. In the employability policy literature, the importance of students learning how to use ‘transferable skills’ is frequently emphasised; however, the elusive nature of when and how to ‘transfer’ and ‘apply knowledge’ within a given context, presents complex decision-making dilemmas for students (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson 2007; Yorke and Knight, 2007). For example, theories of how to manage, lead and work in teams, crosses all business studies programmes at the University of Aspiration but some of the students in the business clinic did not draw sufficiently well on their programme guidance on effective team working to ensure the completion of projects. While several other teams were well organised and shared the tasks equally, other students’ teams did not elect a leader/coordinator. In order to ensure the completion of the project, members of the academic staff had to intervene to guide and support the less confident student teams.

**Business Clinic Models - Challenges and opportunities for the University**

The Business Clinic model was fairly successful for the first 5 years but then it was dissolved and queries in year 6 were directed to the formal business section of
University for action. The pressure of their academic programmes meant that the
volunteers from the academic teams started to break up. The normal academic workload
ensured staff’s priorities had to be on supporting the students to successfully complete
their programme, so extra-curricular employability activities, as welcomed as they were,
could not be given the necessary attention.

The main reason the original Business Clinic model failed was because it was not
embedded in the modules in the programmes. Since the original research study has just
been completed, however, annual reviews of programmes in 2017 to 2018 have provided
the opportunity to ensure skills for employability initiatives and projects, could now be
fully mapped to learning outcomes of a module and embedded into the programmes.

While universities endeavour to operate within business principles, the issue of what is
valued creates tensions in the provision of an academic and vocational higher education.
It is more difficult to create a ‘Business Clinic’ for students to work with businesses
within the existing pedagogical structure, without operating it as a ‘business’ with formal
structures and waged employees. As a university higher education system continues to
evolve to ensure the employability of its students, it is crucial that the acquisition of
knowledge remains at the core of the ‘university’s business.’ Business education in a
twenty-first century university is important to a society’s development, because it
provides so much more to the student’s personal development than just employment
training or skills development (Barkas, 2011). A university education remains a safe
place of ‘self-efficacy’ development, whereby students’ ideas have value and can be
explored without the pressure to always be ‘real’ in business terms. Universities continue
to seek new ways to further their links with businesses, (Barkas, Scott, Poppitt and Smith,
As universities emphasise their business model approach to students’ skill development, it is equally important, however, to find space in the curriculum for students to feel free to be innovative. Research into higher education pedagogy, therefore, must continue to seek ways to find this ‘innovative space’ but also embrace both academic and vocational education within its academic curriculum model.

Although the original Business Clinic model had failed, it was the catalyst that helped to develop the University’s relationships with local businesses. Although the model of the Business Clinic had proved challenging for the academic staff in terms of how best to manage the initiative, the main opportunities to address students’ employment skills within the formal pedagogical model had emerged. Alongside external funding, the experience of starting the Business Clinic had helped the University to secure students’ placements and projects with Small and Medium Enterprises from six business sectors: Legal Practices, Recruitment Agencies, IT businesses, Accountants, Manufactures and Service sector providers. Companies from these sectors have now started to work with the University to offer students placements and paid internships. The student placements range from two to four weeks and the internships for three to four months. The students will work on a project designed by the company. At the time of writing in July 2018, the main request from SMEs was for help with digital marketing projects, with other companies offering students internships for the development of business strategy and/or product/service development. The University currently has a number of funded student work placements to start in the summer of 2018, so this development was the most successful outcome of the Business Clinic model.
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