Project Report – Transferable Skills in Higher Education

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Name of Project

Transferable skills: development and assessment – a development and feasibility study.

Project Aims

To help universities to provide the necessary skills to make graduates more employable by developing and evaluating a system of skills development, assessment and recording delivered as an integral part of the course and not involving extra 'skills tasks'.

Literature Sources

This project was initiated by the need for universities to produce graduates with better transferable skills (CVCP, 1998; Dearing, 1996; Wilson, 1995). The trial has been based on experience at Brunel University and other researchers (e.g. Bolton, 1997; HILP, undated; University of Nottingham Key Skills Team, 1999). A fuller list of sources is in the 'References' section below.

Project Method

A 4 year pilot study had been carried out with 3 cohorts of HND students developing and assessing their skills against Key Skills at NVQ level 4 <u>within</u> their HND programme. Based on that case study Key skills were written to be developed and assessed within a 1 year foundation, Year 0, programme for students not yet meeting the entry standards for the Business and Management degree and aimed at helping them to reach those standards and to perform to the full extent of their intellectual capabilities when on the degree itself.

The HND pilot
In order to be awarded an HND a student must reach at least a pass standard in Common Skills. The Common Skills were mapped against NVQ level 4 Key Skills drawn up by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and validated by Edexcel. Sufficient correlation was thereby established to get Edexcel agreement that obtaining a Key skill would be sufficient evidence to award at least a Pass in the relevant Common Skill. A system of students claiming skills competence, and a Log Book to record skills accredited were devised. Lecturers assessed and accredited skills as part of the HND coursework. Members of the team with D32/33 qualification internally assessed that accreditation. Students were required to produce a Portfolio of Evidence supporting their skills accreditation for inspection by an external verifier who was also the Edexcel External Assessor.

The Project
A set of Transferable Skills, along with a system of assessing and recording skills accreditation, was produced for the new Foundations in Business Management programme at year 0 for international students. These were based on the skills and system used in the HND pilot, but modified in the light the experience from the pilot of some skills and performance criteria being overly prescriptive and restrictive and the system being somewhat bureaucratic. The programme was as follows:

Autumn Semester	**Spring Semester**
English Language	a long thick module over both semesters

Effective Self –Managed Learner
IT and Media
Foundations of Finance
Quantitative Methods for Business

Planning and Strategy
People and Organisations
Foundations of Marketing
The Business Environment

The Transferable Skills were

Application of Number	Collect and Record Data
	Data Presentation and Interpretation
Communication	Take Part in Discussions
	Produce written material
	Receive and respond to Information
Information Technology	Use an IT System
Improving Own Learning and Performance	Identify Targets
	Plan and Monitor Achievement of Targets
Working with Others	Decide Collective Goals and Responsibilities
	Work to Collective Goals
Problem Solving	Identify Problem and Plan to Solve it
	Reach Solutions

Each of the skills contained at least three, often more, Performance Criteria elements within them. A 'blobby chart' was produced to ensure that there were several opportunities over more than one module for students to develop, practice and be assessed on each skill.

Findings

On the HND pilot 88% of the first cohort, 89% of the second and 86% of the third were awarded an Edexcel Key skills capability award in addition to their HND.

On this project 19 students took 9 modules. Of these 3 yielded data capable of providing an insight into the effectiveness of developing and assessing transferable skills. They were IT and Media, Effective Self-Managed Learner and Quantitative Methods for Business.

IT and Media
Skills development and assessment was via 2 pieces of coursework and observation of 11 lab sessions.
17 students completed both assignments on time and were awarded A – 3, B – 6 and C – 8.
14 students achieved skills competence. 3 others were awarded a poor pass grade in the module, on the intervention of the Course Leader, despite their marginal fails in skills competence.

Effective Self Managed Learner
The module assessment was by means of a Learning Plan and a Portfolio (Learning Log) but skills were also developed in class exercises such as identifying group work roles and skills self assessment. The Learning Plan required a self analysis, an identification of Learning Opportunities and a gap analysis. The Portfolio required the keeping of a Learning Log and self and peer assessment of a presentation. Five students presented Learning Plans which were assessed as A – 2, B – 1 and C - 2. The Learning Logs were returned to the students as soon as they had been assessed and so were not available to the researchers but anecdotal evidence and evidence from a similar module at level 1 on the BSc. eCommerce showed students sought feedback on performance and progress regularly from the supervisor and responded actively to it thus positively assisting their own progress.

Quantitative Methods for Business
Assessment was by means of 2 coursework assignment and two class tests. The transferable skills of collecting and recording data, data presentation and interpretation, and using an IT system were assessed

by these forms of assessment but the reason for this because of an overlap between the content and the skills rather than a deliberate assessment of the skills specified for the module. The grades awarded were A – 2, B – 7, C – 6 and D – 4.

The other modules provided very little in the way of usable data for the project. Ten of the 12 skill areas were demonstrated in general terms (83%) although the particular skills were not often demonstrated specifically. Most of the specific skills were demonstrated in five of the 12 skill areas (42% of skill areas and 34% of specific skills). The skill areas fully or mainly demonstrated were:

AN2   Data presentation and Interpretation
C2   Produce written material
IT1   Use an IT system
IOLP1   Identify targets
IOLP2   Plan and monitor achievement of targets.

The Course Leadership of the Foundations in Business Management course was changed, just prior to the start of the academic year, from the leader of the project to another member of staff who had no previous involvement with skills development and assessment either on this project or on the previous HND pilot study. The result was a much weaker focus on the implementation of skills development and assessment by the staff team than had been hoped for when the project was established.

Conclusions

This study followed the HND pilot that demonstrated that skills development and assessment could be delivered within modules as an integral part of a programme. In attempting to simplify that approach, by eschewing the portfolio of skills assessed independently of the module, this trial was largely unsuccessful. Under the *laissez faire* course management style that prevailed during the trial complete success was limited to the one module (IT & M) where the module leader was fully committed to and qualified in the assessment of skills (TDLB D32/33). There was also partial success in one other module (ESML) where the module leader was in favour of the principle whilst not implementing all the detail in practice. Without a fully committed and enthusiastic Course Leader, skills development is likely to be seen by many of the team as nothing more than extra work on matter not directly connected to their particular module.

The fact that, unlike in the HND pilot, the skills were not nationally accredited and did not contribute any credit value to the award may well have led to students seeing the skills element as and 'extra' which they could ignore with no consequences to follow from doing so. The HND students would not be awarded an HND if they did not achieve the Key Skills Award so ignoring the skills was element was not an option for them. However, the 'cost' of the accreditation was what many in the pilot found to be over prescriptive and unnecessarily detailed skills specifications and a time and resource hungry bureaucratic system to produce the portfolio of evidence.

Although the system was not popular with the staff team or the students, claiming skills and having the skills accreditation recorded in the Log Book, and then producing a Portfolio of Evidence cross-referenced to particular skills, was a useful exercise in data management and was a reflective process in itself. Familiarity with the process and the final completion of the Log Book meant students grew in self-confidence.

Recommendations

Return to a portfolio of evidence assessed independently of the modules

The logbook used in the HND pilot will be made available on the project website.

Simplify the number of skills levels to two

The QCA define broad descriptors for five levels of NVQ skills – the HND pilot was at level 4 with level 5 being postgraduate level.

Anglia Polytechnic University have devised level descriptors for degree levels 0 (foundation) 1, 2, and 3 at undergraduate level and level 4 postgraduate. The NVQ pilot was successful but the system was complex and hungry of staff resources. This trial of the simplified system at level 0 had limited success and most staff ignored the skills assessment on the grounds of complexity. Despite the advantages of assessing skills at each level of an undergraduate course, in the interests of simplicity, it is recommended that levels should be restricted to those already trialed.

Foundation Level This level was demonstrated to be potentially successful as indicated in the one or two modules where it was in fact implemented. This particular programme is no longer offered by this university. It is necessary to have a dedicated and enthusiastic Course Leader and at least some members of the team with qualification in skills accreditation and assessment.

Undergraduate level Anecdotal evidence and results from Brunel's own survey of businesses suggest that many employers think that graduates do not have the basic skills that employers require. The current system in BBS relies on module specifications laid down but not, to the researchers' knowledge, assessed as part of the external examining or quality assurance process. In practice the current system seems to the researchers to be largely pointless and ineffective in providing a structured approach to developing and assessing skills. A simpler and less ambitious target is recommended. This should use the level and skills specifications previously demonstrated to be successful in the HND pilot i.e. NVQ level 4. Students should be given a briefing and a logbook when commencing level 1 and have the full 3 years, or more, of their degree course in which to build up a portfolio of evidence. In one respect this will be simpler for staff than this trial has been in that the collection of evidence will return to a student–led approach, rather than being the responsibility of the module leaders. It is thought that the system will only work if there is a degree of coercion – that is students should not be awarded a degree unless they have passed the skills (as with the HND students on the pilot). Similarly in retrospect and in the light of this trial, it can be seen that the HND pilot was only successful because it used qualified internal verifiers and an external assessor. It is recognised that the training and selection of these human resources on any large scale will be expensive and many staff teams will need a sea change in attitude towards skills. The recommendation may be draconian and costly but should be viewed in the light of repeated requests over many years by employers for graduates who have better generic skills.

Acknowledgments

References

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