Engaging Student Academic Partners

Nic Bartholomew

Whilst reflecting upon our institutional philosophy that embodies an employability-driven approach towards cultivating professional, work-ready graduates, the BCU Student Academic Partnerships (SAP) scheme surfaces as a consummate opportunity to enhance the employability status across our student body. The SAP scheme, established through CELT and the Students’ Union, has successfully employed approximately 900 students to date, in various collaborative projects across the university. Whilst the key aims of student: academic partnership working is to instill a sense of student ownership in the institution and to enhance our learning and teaching practice, the emergent projects essentially afford opportunities to foster key transferable skills. This paper focuses on the evaluation of one particular SAP project, within a healthcare context, and reveals some of the benefits and limitations of partnership working whilst offering recommendations for effective practice.

SAP Project to enhance Employability

‘To be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure’ (Hawkins, 1999). This mantra has been particularly pertinent to Higher Education; ostensibly due to the 2008/9 recession that has led to a gradual increase in graduate unemployment rates (Office for National Statistics, 2013, p.7). As the global financial crisis has led to ramifications in job opportunities available to students joining higher education programmes over recent years, graduate employment remains an area of critical concern across the sector. Although graduates may experience better employment outcomes than non-graduates, almost 50% still find themselves unable to take up graduate positions in the immediate term (ibid). Graduates may subsequently develop a sense of becoming ‘deskilled’ in the period between leaving higher education and securing a graduate level job. Becoming de-skilled may be one perception but were students truly employable in the first place?

Our students enter higher education to study a particular programme that resonates with them at an intrinsic level perhaps, but a primary motivation is often much more pragmatic, with four out of five students attending University to improve their career opportunities (CBI/NUS, 2011) But, what does it mean to be employable and are students clear about employer requirements to ensure job security for the future? Work experience is certainly an essential step towards gaining employment of course, with work placements or internships considered of equal importance to employers as a first-class degree (High Fliers Research, 2013, p.6); but employability skills also refer to generic transferable skills and personal attributes. Archer and Davison (2008) suggest that employers are expecting more than a degree from graduates and are seeking attributes such as good communication and team-working skills; confidence, integrity, personality as well as organisational and analytical skills. And so, whilst acknowledging these traits, can we do more to meet the needs of our employer stakeholders and prompt our students to become more cognisant of the pressures to develop these transferable skills?
The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (AGCAS) acknowledges the challenge faced by graduates and the service urges students to ‘do all they can to make themselves employable’, and to ‘make sure that they are giving clear evidence of the skills and attributes individual employers are seeking’ (Martin, 2010). AGCAS also instructs HE institutions to engage in activities that will enhance the employment prospects of students and graduates.

The SAP scheme will certainly offer students an opportunity to engage in employment-enhancing activities but as academics, we need to ensure that the experience is ultimately conducive to learners developing the requisite skills so valued by potential employers. Delegating work to students in particular should not be viewed with any level of anxiety. This principle of ‘delegation’ may be contextualised here as student involvement in curriculum design which as a principle in itself has been widely advocated in literature (Trowler & Trowler, 2010) and is promoted by the Higher Education Academy. The Student Academic Partner initiative at BCU was well received by the HEA to the extent that they now offer a ‘Change Programme’ to help other HEI’s develop their capacity to involve students in curriculum development and quality enhancement. Nevertheless, we need to consider how partnership projects are managed effectively to maximize the student learning experience. The following example outlines potential benefits and pitfalls associated with one particular SAP project.

There is a requirement for Allied Health Professions (AHP) graduates who have been out of work for more than two years to undertake a period of updating skills and knowledge prior to re-registration. This period includes up to 15 days of private study that may include distance learning or e-learning (Health Professions Council, 2011). In response to this, a collaborative SAP project emerged from the (previous) Faculty of Health to develop an open, online ‘Virtual Employment Centre (VEC). The aim of the project was to generate an open access learning resource to support students and graduates in the development and maintenance of both profession-specific and generic employability skills. The VEC project would help to create an open environment in which AHP graduates could access resources relating to their profession to refresh their knowledge of key skills, policies and competency benchmarks during private study. Furthermore, graduates would also access learning resources to enable them to develop the more generic transferable skills that may further enhance their future job prospects.

As a consequence, four AHP undergraduates were recruited to the project, to survey recent graduates on their current employment status and their self-reported preparedness for the world of work and to help identify, gather and develop resources for the VEC.

Evaluating the process
The overarching objectives of the project were two-fold. The long-term objective was to generate accessible resources to enhance the employability status of students through the VEC. The second and perhaps less explicit
objective was to work collaboratively with students; to learn from each other and to ultimately enhance the employability skills of individual student partners whilst establishing an exemplar of collaborative practice. The development, or rather the population of the VEC will be an ongoing process but the opportunity to work with student partners; and the subsequent identification of key benefits and potential pitfalls of partnership working has been a tangible output and worthy of deeper exploration.

A project evaluation framework was established as the project progressed, focusing less on the *product* i.e., the VEC, but more on the *process* of working in student/academic partnerships. It became evident that the levels of engagement varied considerably across student partners and it was deemed prudent to explore the underpinning reasons for this imbalance, as it could impact on the success of future funded SAP projects offered through CELT. The RUFDATA tool (Saunders, 2000) was deployed as a simple framework to guide the evaluation process. RUFDATA is an acronym for procedures that shape evaluation activities and was developed by University of Lancaster as an accessible tool for novices to be inducted into evaluation design and to begin a process of reflexive questioning from which procedural decisions would emerge. The overarching aim of the SAP scheme is to improve the student learning experience thus, it would be important to determine whether student partners felt they benefitted from their experiences overall. Any potential barriers to engagement, once identified, could be managed and avoided in future SAP projects.

The evaluation framework for the project is outlined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Framework for evaluation of SAP project</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reason for evaluation</strong> – to gather experience of collaborative project work between students and academic staff to inform future practice. To identify factors that support or inhibit levels of student/academic partner engagement.</td>
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<td><strong>Uses of evaluation</strong> – reporting back to SAP scheme coordinators regarding guidance on conducting SAP projects (e.g. for use during project induction events).</td>
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<td><strong>Foci for evaluation</strong> – Student partner and academic partner experiences of collaborative project work</td>
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<td><strong>Data and evidence</strong> – Qualitative interviews/reflective accounts</td>
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<td><strong>Audience for evaluation</strong> – Academic colleagues, students, senior management, CELT, Students’ Union HE sector</td>
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<td><strong>Timing</strong> – 6 months</td>
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<td><strong>Agency conducting evaluation</strong> – Project lead using Voxur units for data gathering)</td>
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Adapted from RUFDATA (Saunders, 2000)
Two student partners consented to share their experiences as a consequence of responding to a set of evaluation questions. As face-to-face questioning by academic project partners might influence the nature of responses as a consequence of interviewer bias, self-managed Voxur units were deployed to capture short video clip responses to pre-recorded questions posed by a talking head. Evaluation questions were themed to:

1. establish whether student motivations to participate in the project were intrinsic or extrinsic. Students who perceive projects to be valuable and relevant to them will be intrinsically motivated to engage (Martin, 2006) and this could lead to improved outcomes.

2. determine the extent to which students felt on equal terms with their academic partners. Students as co-designers should be empowered to take on responsibilities and become change agents (Bartholomew et al, 2011). If there is inequality in the power balance between students and academic partners then the sense of empowerment and project ownership could be inhibited.

3. Determine whether the project offered participants an opportunity to learn and develop further.

A review of responses suggests that although participants valued the project, the experience of each respondent differed significantly and this may be linked to their differing levels of engagement, from high to low, and their different motivations for participating in the project. Respondent 1 had identified her previous experience in project management on application to the scheme, and was duly employed on the project. As the project progressed, she immersed herself fully, managed it effectively and required limited steer from the academic partners. Her responses to the evaluation questions revealed a deep understanding of the project aims and objectives and reflected her level of engagement and ownership:

‘I kind of feel that it is my project’, ‘my ideas drive it’, ‘made me more self-aware’ ‘I’m used to running projects’. ‘They (academic partners) have signposted me to people…which has been really nice, much more than them prescribing’

Respondent 1

In contrast, respondent 2 had identified some previous experience in content creation rather than project management on application. He had subsequently demonstrated limited levels of engagement with the project and this was reflected in his responses:

‘I sat back a bit…should have taken advantage of the chances I had instead of letting them pass me by’, ‘(this) would really push me outside of my comfort zone’, ‘as I didn’t contribute as much as other partners, I didn’t have much ownership’.

Respondent 2
Respondent 2 also revealed that engagement with other student partners was a mixed experience as he suggested that some “would not communicate with me” and would “go away and do their own thing”.

Although Respondent 1 was largely self-sufficient in relation to project tasks, due to her previous experience, tacit knowledge and self-efficacy, Respondent 2 would have valued more guidance in the early stages of the project. On reflection, a staged project induction could have been established to build a community of practice (within the team) with a shared sense of ownership and wherein individual participants would be clearer about their role/s and contributions. Indeed, the Higher Education Academy identifies principles and values for successful partnership, where participants must ‘share a collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership and the individual responsibility for the contribution they make’ (HEA, 2014, p.4). In addition, the context of the SAP project offers a socially situated learning context (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as participants demonstrated mixed abilities and as a consequence, could learn from each other so that the knowledge and skills that emerged from project engagement could be developed collectively.

Lave and Wenger’s principle of socially situated learning emphasises sociocultural over social constructivist approaches to learning whereby shared values and the nurturing of relationships within a culture of participation are core concepts (Aubrey and Riley, 2015, p.172). Lave and Wenger’s term ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ may be likened to the development of professional skills through an apprenticeship. This concept broadly explains the process whereby ‘novices’ within a community of practice, engage with simple tasks whilst interacting with and learning from the experienced ‘masters’. The green novices, sitting on the periphery of the community, can still acknowledge their own contributions, thus building their own identity whilst becoming members of the community in their own right.

The SAP project, as a social learning system, afforded an ideal opportunity for Respondent 2 to become initiated in project management and learn from his more experienced colleague whilst sharing the same (project) goals. However, without a stronger steer, participant interactions became sporadic and schisms developed which inhibited the engagement of the less experienced Respondent 2 whilst Respondent 1 flourished. Wenger (2010, p.12) identifies the need for a structured environment within a community of practice, comprising negotiations, rules and procedures to enable participation and ‘membership’ building to develop. Wenger likens a community of practice to a learning partnership whilst acknowledging the need for someone to convene a social learning space whereby participant roles are clarified and supported. Academic partners within such SAP projects would be responsible for taking leadership in this context to ensure that learning potentials are maximized. Induction events, role allocations and regular catch-up meetings for negotiations to take place would form a structure for project progression and an opportunity for collaborative learning.
Although the responses from Respondent 2 suggest that his learning experience was constrained due to his limited engagement, the opportunity to reflect on the experience, as a consequence of the evaluation process, will have been beneficial in itself. Schon (1983) emphasised the value of reflective practice within organisations as an integral part of professional development and a method to encourage continuous learning. Offering student partners the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of project participation will encourage them to build the efficacy beliefs and self confidence that is valued by future employers and will impact positively on their future motivations to engage and develop in the workplace. Dacre Poole and Sewell (2007) created a framework model to help students develop their employability, and reflection is a central component to allow students to value their learning experiences and consider their future actions for ongoing development.

“Employers value people who have undertaken work experience, been able to reflect upon that experience and then go on to articulate and apply what they have learnt.”

Dacre Poole and Sewell (2007)

Ultimately, the aforementioned employability model demonstrates how learners may reflect on their experiences to develop self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence: traits that provide the link between knowledge, experience and employability. SAP project activities can certainly offer opportunities to develop employability skills that can be transferred to the workplace but self-awareness, as an element of self-efficacy is also key (HEA, 2004:17) and will be a significant driver for subsequent engagement.

Although Respondent 2 acknowledges his lack of engagement, he reflects on the experience as a “reminder to be proactive” and to “take advantage of the chances I had”. The evaluation process certainly prompted this useful insight and could be readily incorporated as a mandatory element of SAP project management to ensure that student partners take the time to reflect on the process as a learning experience. However to be truly effective, the reflective cycle would need to be continued through the inclusion of personal development planning (PDP) which in turn can be actioned by participants and articulated to future employers. This reflective process may be associated with the project itself through an evaluation exercise, or may be woven into existing curricula via module assessments relating to PDP or extracurricular learning. Although it could be argued that module assessment, as a potential for performance goal orientation, can foster extrinsic motivations, an assessment that encourages learners to reflect on their work experience and articulate the learning that emerges as a consequence, will help them to articulate this learning to future employers.

Conclusion

As SAP project activity (although paid), undeniably applies an extra workload on students, we could take a stance that SAP advertisements include person specifications to attract participants with the appropriate attributes (and
motivations) to ‘get the job done’, much like Respondent 1. Students, who do not possess the appropriate skills whilst demonstrating low levels of self-efficacy, might be more likely to disengage with a collaborative project therefore a robust application process could potentially prevent disengagement and potential project failure. But in this way, are we simply bolstering the graduate attributes of students who inherently possess many employability skills and more likely to exceed in the job market anyway? Perhaps this is no bad thing as the filtering of applicants, to ensure success of SAP projects 1. reflects the realities of the job market and 2. ensures that students with a wide range of skills are acknowledged for the contributions they can offer to our academic practice. However, a key purpose of higher education is to enable individuals to develop their capabilities and be committed to lifelong learning (Dearing, 1997, p.72). Students who demonstrate neither an intrinsic motivation nor the self-efficacy required to engage fully with such projects may need a little nurturing to guide them through the process and this should be designed into the structural aspect of a SAP ‘community of practice’ to determine how participation operates (Wenger, 1998, p. 63). Consequently, a successful project outcome and satisfaction in the task will help to foster intrinsic motivations and self-efficacy, and the development of transferable skills to be applied in the workplace.

As a consequence of the project evaluation and reflecting on the process overall, it was clear that a broad framework to support the co-management of SAP projects would be beneficial to help ensure future success. The framework is presented as a series of recommendations for colleagues wishing to participate in future SAP projects.

**Recommendations for Management of SAP projects**

- Devise a clear project description for advert including clear milestones for completion and core aims.

- Consider two or more student partners per project for mutual support, managing workloads and reciprocal learning within a community of practice.

- Clearly define Academic roles and Student roles from the outset.

- Opportunities for ‘team-building’ could be explored to reinforce relationships within the project team and establish ‘membership’

- In the case of SAP projects proposed by academics, personal specifications for project applicants should be drafted where appropriate and students should offer their own rationale for applying.

- Academic partners should discuss workloads with student partners to establish timeframes for task completion and to avoid work overload.
• Offer regular and frequent partner meetings during the early stages of the project whilst moving to a more hands-off approach as the project develops.

• Student partners should be given the opportunity to ‘opt-out’ of the project should other work/social pressures become unmanageable

Furthermore, academic partners should offer student partners a defined process for reflection to allow for students to consider how they have developed as a consequence of project participation. Personal development planning can be a vehicle for reflection that enables students to transfer their learning to workplace settings whilst managing their future development and career plans.

References


