Technology for employability: HE case studies
University of Southampton: Mission Employable

Summary
Dr Eleanor Quince, Faculty Director of Employability in Humanities at the University of Southampton, identified a challenge of students not being engaged sufficiently early with the employability agenda. To overcome this, Dr Quince decided to empower the student body to drive change. This was done through a range of interconnected employability activities with an emphasis on using social media and multimedia to engage students with peers, alumni, staff and employers, all facilitated by four student interns. The activities included:

» setting up an alumni network
» an interactive multimedia compulsory undergraduate first year employability module
» peer mentoring scheme
» a formative research and evaluation exercise to drive continuous enhancement in the initiative

Organisation
University of Southampton: Faculty of Humanities
The Humanities Faculty offers single or combined degrees across seven disciplines: Archaeology, English, Film, History, Modern Languages, Music and Philosophy and currently has approximately 3,000 students.
Context and challenge

The Director identified a special problem related to employability and humanities disciplines, due to perceptions amongst both students and staff that a humanities degree is less likely to be of interest to employers than more specialised or vocationally driven degrees e.g. in STEM subjects. Furthermore, research undertaken by the institution's Careers and Employability Service established the need for students to start considering, preparing and applying for jobs much earlier than in the past. Past discussions with colleagues had identified a goal for employability and careers guidance to commence from the very beginning of a degree programme. It also needed a strong focus on highlighting the importance of employability and developing the necessary student skills, knowledge and experience in preparation for employment. However, Faculty initiatives to put this into practice, such as optional careers events and embedding short talks into existing modules, failed to garner student interest in the importance of employability. The Faculty therefore decided that a new approach was needed which would be both engaging and flexible, with tailored options for each of the seven disciplines.

Making it happen

An innovative approach was needed to rise to the challenge of engaging and giving power to students to creatively drive change in the employability agenda. There also needed to be an emphasis on using social and multimedia. Four students were recruited to work as interns on the University's Excel Placement Programme for twelve weeks over the summer of 2014, working in partnership with Faculty and University partners on the following activities:

» The student interns identified the need for branding to bring together all the new and existing employability activities under one umbrella and the Mission Employable brand was subsequently launched via the team blog. A key focus of the working group was student-led activity to effect change in the faculty

» The interns, in partnership with Dr Quince, identified the need for engaging employers, therefore an external advisory board was formed, led by two of the student interns. Its aim is to increase employer engagement and support identification of potential experience opportunities for students. It is structured as a core board with active members together with a wider network of members who would be invited to participate in specific events and activities. This is all within agreed terms of reference that define roles and responsibilities and identify benefits for all members

» The intern team also identified the need for engaging alumni, therefore an alumni network was formed. The interns created, led, developed and launched the VIP Alumni Scheme (now called the Humanities Alumni Network). A key aim is to raise awareness (amongst current students) of the importance of developing employability skills during a degree. It was felt important to create the conditions for alumni and students to engage online, therefore a multi-channel approach was adopted using social media such as the professional network, LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook
The students interns also worked in partnership with the University’s Careers and Employability Service to create content for a pilot compulsory undergraduate first year employability module, with the intention of creating similar modules for second and third year students in future years. Learning resources were created which can be customised to specific disciplines within the faculty and which link with Mission Employable social media feeds, enabling students to research their personal career preferences and alter and plan their professional development.

A third intern led the development of a Faculty peer mentoring scheme to support new students and to develop employability skills relating to mentoring. The scheme is non-paid and is for all incoming humanities students, with 168 mentors in total. It is structured as a pair of mentors (paired by mixing different levels of study) from each discipline helping no more than fifteen mentees. Meetings are held every two weeks throughout semester one, with extra or one-to-one meetings held at the discretion of the mentors.

The fourth intern undertook research and evaluation, including researching student-led change activities within the UK higher education sector. This led to the creation of a report, which detailed recommendations including the need for greater creativity in classroom group work and particularly for higher levels of student engagement.

This activity included development of a reflective tool for use by students to help them reflect on their employability related curricula or extra-curricular activities. The tool takes two forms: a quick online ‘quiz’ for students to record their experience and an end-of-activity ‘case study’. This showcases the employability skills used and developed through each activity and demonstrates their value to potential employers.

The four interns also worked in partnership with fourteen other student interns from the institution’s eight faculties on a university wide initiative - Southampton Opportunity Project - to showcase student curricula, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and demonstrate student employability skills (see www.soton.ac.uk/opus).

Technology

A range of social media and multi-media underpin the initiative and engage students, staff, alumni and employers:

- Communications and engagement between the team, Faculty, students and alumni are through a team blog (WordPress), regular digital Faculty newsletters (PDF), a Twitter account, a Panopto video and Facebook
- Students used Facebook engage with their peers for example using polls to identify event ideas, calls for volunteers, event topics, event notification/promotion and feedback
- The professional network LinkedIn is used to support the alumni network with LinkedIn groups created for each of the seven humanities departments. Alumni were invited to join the groups by faculty staff and
student partners through the Mission Employable student working group. Students can join the groups through the virtual learning environment (VLE) in order to engage with former students and request advice and guidance.

- **Scoop.it** was used to build research and profiles on HE group activity and employability, enabling teams to share research findings and contribute to raising the profile of Mission Employable.

- Students from humanities’ subject societies and course representatives (members of the Mission Employable Student Working Group) were encouraged to create web spaces to showcase employability events and activities (see example: [http://blog.soton.ac.uk/mlemployabilityonlineresource/](http://blog.soton.ac.uk/mlemployabilityonlineresource/)).

- Technology-enhanced learning approaches were used within the compulsory employability module. For example, the first face-to-face session used **Kahoot!** an online quiz accessible by smartphones and tablets. Answers were projected onto a screen in the lecture hall and used as a starting point for discussion on employability skills.

- Relevant online employability resources were signposted according to students’ needs. These included graduate videos (YouTube) on former students’ ‘Journey to Work’; instructional videos on creating a CV including video versions; developing digital skills to improve professional online presence using social media. These were all illustrated by case studies, together with ideas to engage with new platforms that can allow for even greater engagement with employers for students already on Twitter and Facebook.

- Mentors from the second and final year cohorts were recruited using Facebook, Twitter and e-mail and using an online **iSurvey** application. They engaged with their mentees via Facebook Groups to encourage interaction before arrival at Southampton.

- Once the mentors had been trained on campus, an exclusive Facebook group was created where all the mentors from humanities’ seven disciplines could share best practice and resources with guidance and support from the student Peer Mentoring Coordinator. Additionally, mentors used online tools like Doodle Poll to organise meetings with their mentees.

## Impact

Mission Employable has been highly successful in overcoming the challenges associated with lack of student motivation with the employability agenda. The scheme has validated the thesis that development of student employability needs to commence at the beginning of a programme of academic study.

Students, acting as agents of change and working in partnership with staff, have been highly successful in raising the profile of employability amongst students and staff. They have also successfully facilitated engagement between students, employers, staff and alumni. Use of social and multimedia technologies has been pivotal to facilitating interactive engagement between students, employers, alumni and staff with all of the Mission Employable activities. These include mentoring, promotion of events and the employability module.
A valuable set of multimedia learning resources has been created (for the employability module) where there is significant emphasis on supporting students in using social media and multimedia to engage with employers and alumni and showcase their rounded selves. This set can be used time again and built on.

The use of social media by mentors for mutual support and sharing of resources and best practices has been highly effective, evidenced by the high degree of collaboration between them. The Mission Employable initiative has had a significant impact on developing the employability skills of the interns themselves. For instance, one of the interns used his experience of working on Mission Employable in an interview for a role of Strategy Analyst with a Fortune 1000 multinational company to illustrate and evidence his suitability for the job, which he secured. In particular, the CEO was impressed with his use of digital media to present, justify and explain strategic decisions and how he used such media to engage with and influence others.

**Sustainability**

The Mission Employable initiative is now forming further partnerships with a greater number of students. It will be sustained and embedded in the Faculty of Humanities and enhanced as follows:

» More detailed information, advice and guidance will be provided on using social media such as LinkedIn to communicate, engage and influence stakeholders, especially in using social and multimedia for professional purposes. This is particularly being piloted through the second year Humanities Employability Module, which will use the e-portfolio platform Pathbrite as the driving force behind all student engagement with the module

» Promoting further student collaboration

» New digital support for students working and learning at a distance from Southampton

» Empowering students to become more self-sufficient and self-directed

» Developing more advanced website tools to support student-led events

Furthermore, the Director is now in discussion with the University’s Careers and Employability service to see if Mission Employable can be scaled up to become an institution-wide initiative

**Lessons learnt**

A number of lessons have been learnt:
A key lesson learnt is the importance of encouraging students to think about career-planning much earlier than students have done in the past. Simultaneously they gain valuable experience enabling them to lead, shape and run events for themselves and their peers. The initiative has seen humanities students embrace this approach, together with the use of social media and multimedia, to create their own future career opportunities. The adoption of Pathbrite in Year 2 will further encourage students to take control of their own professional development.

Another key lesson learnt is the importance of students reflecting on their experiences, and recording and articulating how they have developed. These activities are supported by an online quiz and students producing a case study to showcase their employability skills.

Attention to detail in the mentoring process was a critical success factor for the initiative. This included student-led training sessions for the mentors, enabling them to understand their role and develop their skills set together with information and guidance on good practices via a Mentor Handbook. Mission Employable will be furthering this detailed approach through the creation of a dedicated Peer Mentoring website for 2015/16.

A formative approach to evaluating the initiative was also crucial for success. For example, mentors would send informal reports to the student Peer Mentoring Coordinator so that the initiative could be regularly monitored for improvement and successes. This has allowed an agile approach to progression with the mentors at the centre of the change process.

The Mission Employable Student Working Group has been highly effective as the means of keeping students at the centre of employability provision. It is the point of review for the Employability Module and Peer Mentoring scheme and leads all complementary activity under the Mission Employable brand.

Find out more

- Dr Eleanor Quince, Lecturer, History & Faculty Director of Employability, Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton
  
  E.M.QUINCE@soton.ac.uk

- Charlotte Medland, Humanities Employability Coordinator, University of Southampton
  
  C.J.Medland@soton.ac.uk

- Case study written up by Dr Peter Chatterton
  
  peter.chatterton@daedalus-e-world.com