Technology for employability: HE case studies

University of Edinburgh: Developing 21st century career-ready graduates

Summary

The history of Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) dates back to the 1770s. ECA was an independent specialist higher education institution until it formally merged with the University of Edinburgh in 2011. The merger of ECA with the University enabled the creation of a new and enlarged college of art by incorporating the University’s School of Arts, Culture and Environment. As a result, the new Edinburgh College of Art comprises not only Art, Design, Architecture and Landscape Architecture, but also History of Art and Music.

Organisation

This case study follows the development of various initiatives at the College of Art pre-merger and the subsequent cross-University developments post-merger.

The College of Art was an early adopter in addressing the employability agenda for its students and had evolved and embedded an integrative approach to curriculum design for all programmes. Developing career ready skills and graduate attributes is integrated into assessed learning outcomes, learning activities and formative “assessment for learning” approaches. Networked online tools and resources are an essential component in providing the necessary supportive learning environment.

These various initiatives have better prepared students for employment and helped them to more fully understand and articulate their employability skills. ECA has also seen a significant increase in student satisfaction with assessment and feedback and, post-merger, its National Student Survey (NSS) rating for
assessment and feedback was amongst the highest NSS scores both in the University and across the UK sector for art and design related subjects. In the 2016 Guardian University guide the Edinburgh College of Art portfolio of subjects in Art and Design are all ranked in the top five, with two of them ranked first overall.

Context and Challenge

Edinburgh College of Art was focusing on career development and student employability back in 2004 and had restructured the curriculum to include a 20-credit module based around professional practice and personal development. Key in the approach was to ensure that the content of the module was taught and experienced primarily through integration with the studio projects and themes of study.

As most creative industries disciplines require working in portfolio-based careers (film makers, for example, will work in project-based teams which will form and re-form with different members for each commissioned project) students need to understand the operational and commercial ways in which they will need to operate and be able to bring problem solving, independent thinking, lateral thinking and project management capabilities to balance their discipline expertise. At the time, some academics did not see the development of employability skills in their students as their personal concern or responsibility, given that it appeared not to relate directly to the teaching of the academic study, but despite this, a need was identified to build the development of such transferable skills into programmes together with supporting students in being able to understand and articulate what these skills meant for them individually.

At the same time as addressing the employability agenda, ECA identified the need to overhaul their approach to assessment and feedback. When the National Student Survey (NSS) was first introduced in England the whole of the Art and Design sector was somewhat shocked at the low ratings given by students specifically for assessment and feedback. This was a particular surprise given the pedagogy used in art and design where students highly-value the personalised and small group-work nature of the teaching. Research subsequently identified that a recurring and specific issue was that tutors failed to explain to students what was actually being assessed, sought and valued; students therefore assumed that if the tutors appeared to like their work and they got on well with them, this somehow translated into being given a good mark. This couldn’t have been further from the reality and the assessment models used in art and design are very well understood, highly-collegiate and very robust; but simply that they were also opaque to students.

Making it happen

To address the need to develop student employability capabilities and engage with the wider context of work, the ECA curriculum was restructured with two 40-credit and two 20-credit modules spanning two semesters, one of which focused on professional and personal development. All of the modules are co-requisite, meaning that they had to be taken at the same time in parallel, enabling their integration through a series of sequential
projects. Students work iteratively through numerous projects and revisit the same or similar challenges but with increasing complexity as they move forward; the first two years of the professional practice module focus on the development of wider studentship skills and graduate attributes such as independent learning, taking responsibility, managing projects, autonomous learning, digital literacy, working in teams working and taking responsibility for the work of others. These are all expected characteristics of learning as described in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and as promoted by the Scottish Government’s employability agenda. By the third year (of a four-year honours degree programme), students are required to define and lead their own thematic project within an external real-world context: for some, this would mean a placement or study-abroad experience. And in the final year students propose and direct their whole year of study with supervision; more akin to research post-graduate pedagogic models.

At the same time as focusing on employability, the College began addressing the challenges and student frustrations around assessment and feedback as highlighted in the poor sector-wide performance in the NSS. As a result, learning outcomes were made more explicit and assessment was constructively aligned to the learning outcomes. Students now receive a profile of grades directly aligned to the learning outcomes – i.e. one grade per learning outcome.

Furthermore, “assessment for learning” approaches were adopted that placed significant emphasis on formative assessment and feedback together with dialogue, self-critical reflection and action on feedback. It is an important principle that giving feedback should require students to demonstrate their understanding of and do something with the feedback given. The approach also includes student self-assessment, requiring them to grade themselves formatively and to write up their own feedback notes. All this means that students do not see their education as a series of separate modules but as a linear, iterative and holistic progression though defined periods of learning, where the development of the types of graduate attributes needed to succeed or which is sought after by employers is invisible and seamless and built into the learning experience. By years three-four, students should then be able to articulate explicitly the skills they have developed and reflect on them and on how they could be applied more widely in different situations and contexts.

The Agency Project: School of Design, ECA

In 2008 the Scottish three year enhancement theme of 21st Century Graduates was introduced to focus specifically on and to raise the profile of embedding the development of career readiness skills and attributes into the curriculum. Building on previous work, ECA’s disciplines further enhanced their approaches to addressing the employability agenda. Of particular note was the approach taken by Graphic Design.

The graphic design programme developed a further innovation within the Professional Practice module called the Agency project, where all undergraduate students are required to operate in a cross-year level graphic design team, working with industry mentors and undertaking real-world projects, with up to 50% of these being live commercial projects. Final year students take on the role of the Agency creative directors, effectively running a real commercial Design Agency and creating a manifesto for the kind of agency they wish to run. The earlier year students have to apply for a job in the team they wish to be part of and can also lose their job if they do not engage and perform well enough. This approach introduces students to the realities and pressures of ‘real-world’ working right from the beginning of a programme. Students are assessed on different aspects depending on
their year e.g. 4th year students, in addition to their portfolio of design work, are assessed on how well they lead
the Agency and how well they line-manage their team inside the Agency. Students are highly motivated by this
experience and the scheme won the first UK-wide Guardian Award for best employability project.

The Edinburgh Award

In 2011 the University introduced the Edinburgh Award to support students in their wider learning while at the
University. The approach enables students to control and manage their own development and confidently
articulate the learning acquired and progress made through drawing on their curricula, co- and extra-curricular
activities. A further dimension is to make students of the award aware of the positive impact they can have when
engaging with those around them. These qualities align with the Universities three overarching attributes in the
Graduate Attributes Framework: Enquiry and Lifelong Learning, Aspiration and Personal Development, and
Outlook and Engagement. In 2013 a further dimension was introduced to the award and students now assess and
provide peer feedback to each other anonymously online, using an adaptive comparative judgement (ACJ)
approach. Both the award and the approach to the online peer assessment and feedback has proven very
successful;

“The Edinburgh Award has swiftly exceeded our expectations, achieving student satisfaction, growth, reach and wider impact
significantly beyond what we originally imagined and far exceeding the target of 500 students per year two years ahead
of schedule”.

“ACJ is like a crowd-sourced/social media style feedback and assessment tool, which is really innovative and very powerful. I
can honestly say that it has been one of the greatest learning experiences for me during my academic studies at the
University.”

Student Led Individually Created Courses (SLICCs): University-wide

The experience gained from the innovations in the art college and from the University’s Edinburgh Award confirmed that not only were students very capable of leading, managing and assessing aspects of their own
learning, but that the levels of active engagement, independence, self-direction and acquisition of new skills and attributes are precisely what employers are seeking over and above an academic degree.

A new innovation was introduced in 2015 to further develop career readiness and to introduce self-reflection and assessment for learning approaches. It is a credit-bearing online undergraduate “self-defined learning experience” module called SLICCs (Student Led Individually Created Courses), underpinned by using e-portfolios to evidence the learning. The module is one where students create their own course, critically self-reflect and formatively self-assess their own learning as part of the experience; all supervised by tutors. There are no formal lectures, the learning outcomes are predefined and are the same for all students, who are required to design and write a proposal for their own learning experience. This can be based on a range of activities e.g. a volunteering experience, a community or personal development project, a research project, a placement, work experience or an internship.

The student proposals for a SLICC are required to detail the learning activities, together with how they will evidence the set learning outcomes (which include learning outcomes that relate to graduate attribute development). Tutors are required to sign-off the academic viability of the proposal and whether it is practically achievable. Students also have to re-interpret the learning outcomes in their own words in their proposal and this aids student understanding of what is required of them, what evidence they need to produce and how they will be assessed.

Before commencing the SLICC journey students are required to attend three induction workshops. The first workshop explains the SLICCs process (i.e. how to design an individual learning experience and what is required in the student proposal). The second workshop focuses on self-assessment, introducing the rubrics that tutors will use for assessment and how to write a critically reflective report at the end of their project. The final induction workshop focuses on how to create a web portfolio complete with the various types of digital artefacts required to evidence the learning acquired. Following these workshops and by the time the student has submitted their project proposal, they will be working on their own (under supervision) but will not have any further tuition. Students also have access to a range of resource links such as open source web-materials e.g. for audio and video editing (to create their digital artefacts) as well as self-assessment diagnostics tools such as Myers Briggs and Belbin, and resources on organising and managing their time.

For the summative assessment submission, students critically select various parts of all their formative reflections, documentation and digital artefacts, and bring these together as a formal submission in their webfolio along with a critically self-reflective and evaluative report. Students are also required to formatively self-grade the final submission. The summative assessment is then conducted by their tutors.

Technology used

ECA designed and developed a bespoke Learning Management System to facilitate both the design of projects, managing the feedback, responses and actions generated by both students and staff and both the formative and summative assessment process and allocation of grades. At the end of each project students can compare ‘side-
by-side’ their graded self-evaluation and the staff assessment along with staff feedback, their own reflections on the feedback given and their intended actions as a consequence.

The Edinburgh Award uses Adaptive Comparative Judgement software by DigitalAssess to enable students to anonymously provide peer-feedback at the first draft stage and finally to summatively assess each other for the award itself.

PebblePad is used to provide the framework, digital workspace and e-portfolio tools to support the individual SLICC for each student for writing their proposal, managing their experience, creating their portfolio of evidence, formatively self-assessing and finally submitting for assessment.

An important element of using online tools and networks is for peer groups to interact and support each other, typically in self-forming groups, and for students to use blogging and messaging tools, regularly documenting, date/time-stamping and reflecting on their experiences and progress, as well as adding digital artefacts (e.g. pictures, audio and video).

The SLICC framework enables tutors to access student portfolios at any stage and evaluate student progress and the learning acquired over-time.

**Impact**

Edinburgh College of Art participated for the first time in the NSS after merger and achieved among the highest ratings for the questions around assessment and feedback in the University and in the sector for art and design.

The process of requiring students to formatively self-reflect and self-grade throughout the programme has had a significant impact on improving how they articulate what they have achieved, including their acquisition of employability skills, particularly as in order to achieve some of the learning outcomes, students have to be able to demonstrate and articulate how they have achieved them.

The use of the portfolio is fundamental to evidencing the quality and standards achieved in art and design disciplines. Increasingly this is being supplemented, and in some cases replaced, by online versions or e-portfolios.

The success of student self-critical reflection and graded self-evaluation is also significantly enhanced in the ECA model by a bespoke learning management system.

The approaches and success achieved above simply would neither be logistically feasible nor as effective without the use of networked online tools and digital resources.
Sustainability

Sustaining and embedding the approach has been core to the enhancement activities, through restructuring of curricula for all programmes, incorporating employability-related learning outcomes (and their assessment) and introduction of more formative ‘assessment for learning’ approaches.

The principles and practices have been widely shared and transferred across the University via strategic initiatives, student systems development and pilot projects, and colleagues who have been directly involved in these projects are beginning to adopt, adapt and contextualise their use in their own disciplines and programmes.

Lessons learnt

The following lessons have been learnt:

» The maximum impact on the student experience has been achieved through a combination of initiatives in respect of curriculum re-structuring, including incorporation of the employability agenda into core learning activities and assessed learning outcomes, together with adoption of more formative assessment for critically self-reflective learning approaches

» Integration of real-world working and learning activities into programmes is highly motivating for students and serves as a powerful mechanism for students to learn, acquire, apply and evidence their employability capabilities

» The SLICCs approach is in its first phase of pilot during 2015 and a robust evidence base will be required to convince staff of the long-term benefits of this model if it is to be fully integrated and embedded within the mainstream curriculum. It is thought that students are therefore likely to lead the way for change and convince their tutors of the benefits they derive from these types of experiences

» The approach demands active learning and engagement of students and it is already quite clear that this is not an easy way of gaining credit; however to-date this does not appear to dissuade students

» Networked online tools and resources are an essential component in providing the necessary supportive learning environment. The logistics of running these types of models in an analogue way would be simply prohibitive

» A critical element of all of the approaches described is for students to gain a greater understanding of assessment and feedback and how to effectively self-assess and evidence the standards they have achieved and the learning they have acquired, and to critically reflect on this
The capturing of tutor feedback and reflective actions using learning management systems makes feedback more visible, with the potential to engage tutors in enhancing the quality of discourse with their feedback to students.

Find out more

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