Building digital and employability capabilities into the curriculum

Abertay University (April 2019)

Summary

Abertay University aims to integrate industry-relevant skills and attributes into its degree courses to ensure graduates can succeed in a competitive job market. Tackling the key challenges of the modern age, courses on offer at the university range from computer game design and ethical hacking to biomedical, environmental, sports and exercise science.

This case study outlines the steps taken to award credit to e-portfolios assignments on undergraduate sports and exercise degrees to enhance student employability through skills of reflection and the development of a professional profile on social media.

Challenge

Recent studies suggest that employers look as much at the attitudes, experience and skills that applicants bring to a post as the subject knowledge they have acquired from studying for a degree. Yet how much do university courses enable students to focus on the broader capabilities that contribute so much to their employability?

“Employers focus above all on the attitudes and aptitudes that will enable graduates to be effective in the workplace – 90% of employers rated it as among the three most important factors, against 62% who rated subject knowledge.”

CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2017

The modern workplace is a digital one, yet digital capabilities are still not routinely integrated into UK universities and college courses. The 37,700 responses of our 2018 digital experience insights survey provide reliable evidence that relatively few students in further and higher education feel their courses prepare them for a digital working environment. However, within 20 years forecasters predict that 90% of all jobs are likely to require some element of digital skills:

“Only 41% of students in HE and FE agreed that their course prepares them for the digital workplace.”

Jisc 2018

To address these issues, course design in higher education needs to include opportunities to demonstrate digital and employability skills, signalling the importance of these components, wherever possible, via the assessment...
framework. Simply supplying students and staff with access to digital learning platforms such as e-portfolios and virtual learning environments (VLEs) is insufficient to ensure students take up the opportunity to prepare for their future employment, as the dean of school of social and health sciences at Abertay University testifies:

“We used to run PebblePad alongside our degree courses but found there was insufficient buy-in from students. It is only by integrating its use in the curriculum and supporting that with 50% credit in the modules in which it is used that we made a difference to students’ capabilities as reflective professionals.”

Andrea Cameron, dean of school of social and health sciences, Abertay University

Solution

To meet Abertay University’s goal of providing transformational educational opportunities for all students, course leaders have used curriculum and assessment design to embed work-readiness in its sports and exercise degree courses.

Credit-bearing e-portfolio assignments place employability at the core of the curriculum by developing students’ skills of reflection, organisation and professional self-presentation. In addition, the design of the courses prompts students to take personal ownership of their career planning.

For the first two years, students follow a core curriculum before selecting a specialism; the final two years then focus on their particular choice of pathway – for example, sports development and coaching, strength and conditioning, physical activity and health promotion or sports and exercise science. In each case, exams form only a small percentage of the overall assessment. Instead emphasis is placed on developing students’ ability to manage their own career development through reflection on their work placements in PebblePad.

While practical activities and work placements (a minimum of two in the final three years) give students first-hand experience of the industry, they are also encouraged to take an active role. Their tutors arrange the first round of placements with Active Schools (a network of sports managers and coordinators run by Sportscotland), but once they have selected their specialism, students are supported in finding placements that match their individual requirements.

Throughout these activities, students use their PebblePad portfolios to create an electronic record of their learning. Encouraging reflection and personal action planning, the webfolios enable students to appraise their strengths and weaknesses and set themselves objectives. The shift in emphasis towards independent learning supported by e-portfolios is reflected in the assessment framework. For example, in the second year placement module, 50% of the credits awarded are for the webfolios that the students assemble during their placements. This strategy not only ensures students view their e-portfolios as their main digital learning space but also helps develop the skills and capabilities valued by employers.

Taking charge of their learning and choice of pathway in this way does not come easily to all students, and even those who are independent learners need support in acquiring skills of reflection, self-assessment and personal development planning. As a result, students attend weekly tutorials during their placement modules to undertake formatively assessed activities that scaffold their progress towards working with e-portfolios as fully active, independent learners.

Designing in digital and employability skills

The following learning outcomes for two sports and exercise work placement modules show how the design of the curriculum uses e-portfolio-based reflection to steer students towards work-readiness.

Example 1: Placement and skill development when working with children in a physical activity context

The first example comes from a module on developing skills in instructing children. The evidence students are required to provide comes in the form of reflective logs and other assets created and/or stored in their PebblePad e-portfolios:
"By the end of this module the student should be able to:

- Reflect on their leadership, communication, organisation and management skills; identify areas for development, and opportunities by which to do this
- Deliver and/or support activity sessions for children in the community and articulate how this activity is contributing to their future career aspirations
- Articulate their skills, strengths, experiences and achievements to a prospective employer
- Understand the demands associated with different professions within the sport and exercise industry and reflect on these in evaluating personal learning and development in the context of career planning."

Example 2: Contexts in sport

In the second example, students are asked to create webfolios in the style of the professional social media platform, LinkedIn. Students can make choices as to how they organise their web pages, although for ease of assessment, the length is restricted to 1000 words per student. The assignment is then submitted via a PebblePad gateway for grading and feedback. The assignment brief explains what students are required to do:

"Title = submit in PebblePad a webfolio asset that is maximally 1000 words long but acts as a LinkedIn-style professional connections platform that showcases your skills, strengths and experiences to prospective future employers.

To pass this coursework, the student is expected to:

(a) Choose a template which balances the need to be professional with the ability to catch a prospective employer’s attention.
(b) Provide a summary of skills, experiences, and personal achievements/assets that would act as a showcase of what you can offer prospective employers in the sport and exercise industry.
(c) Articulate these skills, experiences, and achievements/assets in a manner which demonstrates an ability to balance detail with conciseness.
(d) Demonstrate an ability to be self-reflective."

Showcasing their skills, strengths and achievements for employers may be the aim, but the task involves far more than recreating a CV in PebblePad. This is when students realise they need something unique to say about themselves:

"The world of work is a crowded marketplace so students have to look for ways they can stand out. Examples of what our students do include videos of achievements as athletes or instructors, digital presentations they have given on a theme related to sport, evidence of courses they have run in the community, even images of their time at Camp America – the digital format of the e-portfolio enables students to present themselves in the round."

Andrea Cameron, dean of school of social and health sciences, Abertay University

Employer input

Working directly with employers helps the sports and exercise module leaders check how far the adjustment to the curriculum has addressed student employability needs.

As an example of the beneficial impact collaboration with employers can have on course design, module leaders have introduced an assessed interview task to improve students’ skills in this forum following feedback from a
network of employers. As well as being graded on their performance, students receive a synopsis of their interview responses relative to the employer’s expectations so that they can evaluate and improve on their own performance.

Benefits

Assessments supported by e-portfolios have made a particular impact on student learning and progression on Abertay’s sports and exercise degrees.

Evidence of the impact of these tasks can be found in a recent investigation into the comparative learning gain and ‘value added’ for students from widening participation and non-widening participation groups: a case study from sports degrees (Cameron, Wharton & Scally, 2018). The study, which examines sports graduates’ transition into employment, shows that students view personal development and reflection as key enablers in the achievement of their career aspirations.

In addition, the LinkedIn style webfolios have resulted in significant grade improvements while also delivering efficiency gains (Cameron, Maxwell and Coble: Learning to Link-In.) Graduate testimony also reveals how students continue to gain value from their reflective capabilities once in the workplace:

“The ability to self-reflect has enabled me to develop professionally.”
Abertay sports graduate now a school physical education instructor

“Even as a business owner and a mature student, I learned so much about myself, my strengths and weaknesses.”
Mature student, now a personal trainer

Outcomes

Whatever their starting point, the e-portfolio-based assignments in PebblePad have enabled students to enter the workplace accustomed to using digital media to manage their own career development, improve their performance through self-assessment and make the necessary adjustments to communicate effectively in a professional environment.

In addition from an institutional perspective, opportunities offered by e-portfolios to enhance employability and digital capabilities can have a beneficial impact on KIS data, extending the benefits beyond those experienced by any one student.

Find out more

Contact: Andrea Cameron, dean of school of social and health sciences, Abertay University and HEA principal fellow

Email: a.cameron@abertay.ac.uk

Relevant published work: An investigation into the comparative learning gain and ‘value added’ for students from widening participation and non-widening participation groups: a case study from sports degrees Higher Education Pedagogies, 3(1): 40-59 available online at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23752696.2018.1435297