14 Plan your future! Career management skills for students of languages

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Abstract

At the University of Westminster, the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures has developed a student employability and work-integrated learning project, 'Career Management Skills' (CMS), for undergraduate language students. The main objective was to develop a comprehensive employability strategy for all students on all undergraduate language courses at the university. The programme has evolved to include among the employability provisions a Work Placement module, which started in the academic year 2014-2015. This case study will present the context in which both CMS and the work placement module were implemented, offer an evaluation of both, and assess their impact on students and on the undergraduate programme as a whole.

Keywords: career management skills, work placement module, student employability, undergraduate language courses.

1. Context and rationale

For a number of years, languages departments at British universities have had to be restructured, or in several cases closed, because of the predominance of the English language in the job market and the government's non-prioritisation of foreign languages for secondary schools. However, the University of Westminster's Department of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLC) is

relatively healthy, with 504 undergraduate and postgraduate students in 2015, despite the closure of German in 2014. Paradoxically, it is the job market itself (or to employ the buzzword, 'employability') that seems to help the MLC to hold its ground, as with globalisation, job prospects for humanities graduates increase if students can demonstrate that they can speak a foreign language (Tinsley & Board, 2013, pp. 6, 12, 24; Beyene, 2012). Employability has in turn generated new initiatives that have made language degree courses more attractive to school-leavers.

Hence, in 2008 the University of Westminster's Centre of Excellence for Professional Learning in the Workplace (now Westminster Exchange) funded a student employability and work-integrated learning project to be developed in the Department of Modern and Applied Languages entitled CMS, designed for undergraduate language students at all levels. An Employability Coordinator post was created and I was appointed to develop the project.

2.   Aims and objectives

At the genesis of the CMS project and before implementation, we had three objectives:

- Develop a comprehensive employability strategy for all students enrolled on all undergraduate language courses at the university.

- Maximise student, staff and employer engagement in, and awareness of, the real-world applications of language skills and cultural knowledge.

- Challenge perceptions about the boundaries that separate work from learning in the broad disciplinary area of languages (Robertson, n.d, p. 1).

Employers often view language skills as peripheral to the core attributes they seek, and some students can adopt the same perception. It was therefore seen as

imperative to enable students to bridge that perceptual gap. The next step was to develop workshops that would be embedded in the curriculum, which would allow language students to enhance their employment-related competencies.

3. What we did

3.1. The embedding of CMS

In order to understand how CMS was embedded in the curriculum, it is vital to appreciate the main components of the Undergraduate Language Curriculum at the University of Westminster. Apart from BA French Translation or BA Spanish Translation, all degrees are joint degrees combining languages with another discipline: English Language, English Literature, Linguistics, or International Relations. The Languages Undergraduate programme has three strands articulated around four languages (Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish):

- First, the core curriculum year-long Language Development module (30 credits). Language is developed both as an object of study and as a means of increasing cultural awareness – part of the four elements identified in the 'Languages and Related Studies' benchmark statements (QAA, 2007). Training is provided in the four key language skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing) with a focus on culture.

- Second, the semester-long Area Studies module (15 credits). It focuses on languages as a means of developing cultural awareness and enables students to develop research skills and intercultural competence through documents in English and in the target language.

- Third, the semester-long 'Languages in Action' module (15 credits). This strand uses languages as a means of communication in real-life scenarios which, depending on the student's level of language, will lead up to work-related settings.

As in 'Languages in Action', students use their language and graduate skills within professional contexts, and in order to help students to develop their Professional Development Plan, it was in this particular strand that CMS was embedded at all levels of studies as an hour-long workshop in each semester.

The CMS workshops are not an add-on but an integrated component of the module, embedded incrementally across all three years of the course in the Learning Aims and Outcomes of the Languages in Action strand. All the elements in this strand were approved by external examiners as part of the course validation and revalidation.

At the workshops, students learn how to articulate and present their skills and competencies, enhancing their employability.

3.2.   Content of the CMS workshops

Designing the CMS workshop entailed drawing up a specific programme at each level of study and for each semester; (1) designing PowerPoint presentations, practical exercises, reflective log sheets, and an e-portfolio, and (2) constructing a Blackboard site where students could locate all materials. I engaged the expertise of the Career Development Centre and Blackboard team whose help was invaluable in building the PowerPoint presentations and configuring the Blackboard site. The University of Westminster purchased the use of a professional website, 'My Career', created by the University of Reading[2]. The CMS Blackboard site has direct links to 'My Career' tailored to the content of the workshops. Initially, the content of the workshops was as follows:

- **First year**: Semester 1: Self-awareness; Semester 2: Covering letters and CVs.

- **Second year**: Semester 1: Opportunity awareness; Semester 2: Application forms.

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2. Students access 'My Career' by registering on our online Engage platform: https://engage.westminster.ac.uk/students/abintegro/

- **Third year**: Semester 1: Assessment Centres; Semester 2: Interviews.

A team of three CMS lecturers was trained by the Career Development Centre to deliver these workshops. Regular feedback from students and CMS lecturers revealed that some adjustments to the workshops were needed. For example, Level 6 students felt that the Semester 1 workshop on assessment centres was too daunting and not necessarily appropriate to the kind of employment and companies they would seek in the near future; they requested a more practical workshop. Accordingly, I selected and invited employers from a variety of sectors to deliver workshops on 'Job opportunities for Language Students', targeted to the students' language skills to help students revisit their positioning on the job market. However, some students felt that some of the employer presentations were not particularly relevant to the kind of employment they wished to pursue, leading to further modifications of this particular workshop. The Level 5, Semester 1 workshops also needed some adjustments; students wanted to target their application form to internships and the workshop was slightly altered to reflect this.

The CMS venture met with a degree of resistance from lecturers and students. Some lecturers felt that the injection of employability in their module was superfluous and was taking one hour per semester away from the teaching of the language, since they felt that they 'owned' the dedicated weekly two-hour slot. This in turn was reflected in the perception of the non-usefulness of the CMS workshops by some students. Additionally, as CMS is not credit-bearing and does not count towards the overall degree mark, some students felt they did not have to do the coursework, as for them non-credit-bearing meant non-compulsory. Also, a small number of mature students who had their career fully mapped out felt that they had little to learn from CMS.

To restore students' appreciation of the connection between employability and university studies, I was able to secure sponsorship from two businessmen keen to support our students in their career planning. We were able to award three prizes per semester at each level for the best Reflective Logs submitted on time at the School Registry Office: the first prize was GBP150, the second prize GBP100

and the third prize GBP50. The CMS prizes and award certificates were handed out at a special CMS award ceremony conducted by the Head of Department. On the whole, most students engaged in this form of reflective practice and showed a real need and thirst to articulate the skills acquired during their studies.

3.3.   Internships

As mentioned by Robertson (n.d), the CMS project exploits "the range and diversity of language-related employment and voluntary opportunities that central London offers" (p. 1). Internships have been developed both in Britain and abroad. Internships abroad come from a variety of employment sectors: town halls, university, estate agents, conference centres, tourist offices, and primary and secondary schools. Students engaged in various tasks ranging from website translation to property valuation, reception work, and teaching. Internships in Britain encompass a variety of sectors: museums, showrooms and galleries, energy-saving companies, the hospitality sector, sports, and media.

3.4.   Work placement module

For annual monitoring, I conducted a focus group on the employability provisions in MLC with a sample of students from each year-group. Feedback revealed that students would favour a graded employability programme that included a work placement module. This report was submitted to the MLC Head of Department who supported the idea and facilitated the transition. We kept the CMS workshops at Level 4 and I designed a module *pro forma* for a new work placement module which would be offered to students during the second year and third year of their studies. We were actually the only department in the Faculty not offering a work placement module among option modules.

The work placement module/work shadowing experience in a language/culture setting is a year-long module bearing 15 credits. It provides students with the opportunity to work for a minimum of 30 hours in a setting related to their studies. The aim is to develop professional skills, and apply language skills/cultural knowledge in a real-world work situation. The placement is chosen and

organised by students, but must be validated by the module leader. However, I have been actively engaged in finding relevant employer contacts to facilitate students' approach to employers in order to secure a work placement. Students who have worked during the summer can also ask for validation of this work placement as part of their module. The work placement module is intended to be primarily experiential. Students are required to attend four two-hour workshops during the course of the module, focusing on networking skills, researching a company, identifying and developing transferable skills and writing a 1000-word reflective statement based on a diary kept during the work placement, and a 2500-word report on a salient area of the organisation. Anticipating that the module would be popular, course leaders asked for the module to be capped at 30 students so as not to imperil other option modules whose content is more language-based. Indeed, the module, which has now been running for two years, has proved very popular. Registration is on a first-come-first-served basis and there is always a waiting-list. However, the work placement module attracts two types of students: those who are really interested in acquiring work experience, and those who perceive it as an 'easy module' due to the limited number of workshops to attend. Students have demonstrated varying degrees of engagement in securing placements, and in the first year there were some anxieties regarding the two pieces of coursework, which led in the second year to tutorials being offered to support students in writing their coursework. Nevertheless, in the module's first year of running, half the students obtained a First mark for their two pieces of coursework, and most of the remaining students achieved Upper-Second marks. The need emerged to appoint a work placement officer who would be able to oversee all placement provisions in the faculty. Our next step is to audit all the work placements and make sure they conform to Chapter B10 of the Quality Assurance Agency's Quality Code, 'Managing Higher Education provision with others'.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

All universities in Britain are undertaking a major change programme referred to as 'Learning Futures'. It started in 2012/13, aiming to introduce a revised

curriculum in September 2016. The goal is to produce a simplified curriculum framework with greater course coherence, reduced assessments and more opportunities for work placements[3]. Therefore, with the implementation of the new 'Learning Futures' scheme, the whole MLC programme is being restructured with fewer modules bearing more credits. Hence, the three existing strands have been replaced with two new core semester-long modules at Level 4, worth 20 credits. There are a number of new option modules with an emphasis on culture (all worth 20 credits). The work placement module will now be in the second year only, since in their final year students need to concentrate on their exams rather than looking for work placements. Following course validation and student feedback, we have increased the number of workshops in the work placement module. There will be one workshop on modern technology as a research tool, as well as support workshops on writing the two assessment pieces. Although the cap of 30 students has been removed under the new curriculum, the work placement module will now compete with four other option modules. CMS has been removed from the curriculum mainly for budget reasons. It remains to be seen what fruit this smaller but more targeted focus on employability will produce.

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Employability for languages: a handbook
Edited by Erika Corradini, Kate Borthwick, and Angela Gallagher-Brett