

# University of Exeter

## 1. Case study title

The Exeter Approach to Employability

## 2. Key words

Embedding, multi-faceted approach, continuum of opportunities

## 3. Subjects

All

# **The Exeter approach to employability**

## **1. Summary**

Exeter offers traditional academic and largely non-vocational programmes. None the less, the University has become well recognised for its imaginative commitment to employability which is central to the mission of the institution. We have over a decade's experience of developing employability and PDP-related activities, through a mixture of high-impact top-down and bottom-up approaches that are supported centrally through Learning and Teaching Committee.

Our approach combines a broad range of curriculum-based and accredited and assessed extra-curricula activities. These provide students with a continuum of opportunities to enable them to enhance their employability and become more confident and independent learners. This represents a multi-faceted approach to employability and skills development, and making sense of experiences through personal development planning. Every School participates in curriculum-based activities, with each being supported and encouraged to embed centrally developed teaching and learning packages.

## **2. Setting the Scene**

Over the past decade there has been a significant cultural shift in perceptions, with many more academics interested in these issues. This has been a result of a greater understanding of the employability agenda and from evidence that incorporating employability within curricula does not detract from subject-study. Inevitably some are still reticent, but with an increasing number of 'champions' in each School, leaps and bounds have been made in embedding employability-related activities, personal and key skills and PDP within curricula.

Employability is defined in the Employability Strategy 2003-06 as 'The establishment of clear mechanisms by which students can develop their abilities to use and deploy a wide range of skills and opportunities to enhance their own academic learning and enable them to become more employable.' At the heart of this is the importance of the process of learning and the student's reflection on, and responsibility for, their own learning, in addition to enhancing their job prospects.

## **3. The Institutional Context**

A research-led institution, part of the '94 Group' of HEIs, Exeter maintains the traditional British university values of scholarship and high

quality teaching, alongside new technology and innovation. In recent years, great emphasis has been placed on opening up the University to partnerships of all kinds – with business, the professions and the community.

The University has 15 academic Schools delivering courses in some 40-subject areas. Subject study is dominated by the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Subjects that can be studied at the University of Exeter campuses are largely academic, with occupational and vocational subjects offered by our partner colleges.

Most University of Exeter students currently study on the Streatham and St Luke's campuses in Exeter. The Peninsula Medical School, a partnership between the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth and NHS Trusts in the South West, was established in 2001 and opened its doors to its first students of medicine in October 2002. The University is a major player in the Combined Universities in Cornwall. From October 2004, the University's Cornwall-based programmes will be taught on a new campus at Penryn, near Falmouth. The new campus will allow the University's existing operations in Cornwall to be brought together on a single site for the first time.

The University now has some 9200 full-time students (19% postgraduate) and 2720 part-time students (62% postgraduate). Approximately 90% of undergraduate entrants are under 21 years old at registration and 87.6% of entrants have A Level qualifications. The majority of home undergraduates originate from the South West (26%) and South East (39%) of England. Of our international students, the largest group comes from Asia/Australasia (36% UG and PG combined).

#### **4. Thinking on employability**

We believe that a focus on employability is essential if we are to provide a learning experience that is grounded in relevance and promotes a self-reflective approach to study. This will become increasingly important as we widen participation to include learners with different expectations of education and those who expect to gain skills for life. Our surveys of new students already demonstrate a marked shift in expectations. Most now expect to gain a 'better' job as a result of their time at Exeter. Students need to be supported in achieving these objectives.

The University's commitment to Employability and PDP is set out in the University Strategy 2001-06, Learning and Teaching Strategy 2002-05, Employability Strategy 2003-06, and articulating Strategies for Widening Participation 2003-07 and Business Community and Knowledge Enterprise 2003-07.

Schools outline their commitment to employability to Learning and Teaching Committee through their annual Learning and Teaching Development Plans. The enthusiasm with which Schools approach employability developments varies, with some being reticent to engage with the agenda at all. Often this is do to with the personnel involved rather than School policy, which is why having 'champions' in each School is incredibly important. The network of Careers and Employability Representatives, mostly academics, meets biannually.

## **5. Policy**

The University was strengthened by the formation of the Employability Group, Employability Strategy, and dedicated post of Employability Co-ordinator in 2000. The University is currently working to the Employability Strategy 2003-06, which replaced the 2000-03 Employability Strategy. This Strategy was developed by the Employability Co-ordinator in consultation with the Employability Group, a diverse body of people from across the institution that is chaired by the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching who also chairs Learning and Teaching Committee. Other senior members of the group include; Dean of Undergraduate Studies; Centre Manager of the Learning & Teaching Support Centre (LaTiS); Director of the Careers Advisory Service (CAS) Head of Business Relations Office (BRO) and Senior Assistant Registrar responsible for Programme Support and Management. Staff from Business Relations Office, The Guild of Students, CPD Office, Alumni Office, Education Liaison Office, Widening Participation Office, the Graduate School and Academics also sit on the group.

Academic staff were consulted throughout the development of the current Employability Strategy, initially through the representatives on the Employability Group and then in discussion with the School Careers & Employability Representatives.

The Guild of Students represented the student body in the development of the Employability Strategy. Personnel include the Guild Education Officer, the Student Development Co-ordinator, Volunteering Development Co-ordinator and Student Services Manager.

The Employability Strategy went through the appropriate Committee stages, being first approved by the Employability Group, Learning and Teaching Committee and then Academic Policy Committee.

The Employability Strategy is promoted to staff via the website, staff development sessions, presentations by the Employability Co-ordinator to Senior Management Group and Undergraduate Faculty Board and presentations to the staff bodies from some Schools. The Careers and Employability Representatives from each School are also an essential conduit for dialogue between the Employability Group and individual Schools. In addition to the web, we have a suite of fliers and a booklet 'Go for Something EXTRA!' which sets out all of the opportunities available on campus for students to develop and reflect on their employability skills development. This booklet is produced by the Guild of Students on conjunction with the Employability Group.

The Employability Strategy 2003-06 includes the following provision:

### **Curricula activities**

We have a strong history of promoting active and experiential learning; supporting teachers in new ways of working; developing effective packages for teaching and learning and on monitoring their impact on the staff and student experience. These include:

- Personal and Key Skills (PKS); employability is fundamentally underpinned by a skills framework incorporating self-management; management of learning; communication; teamwork; management of others; problem solving; data handling. These are developed through every programme of study and made explicit through the learning outcomes in module descriptions. Hence every student and academic engages with the employability agenda within everyday curriculum study, with broader, holistic opportunities provided through additional activities.
- Team Development Programme, established in 1997, now impacts significantly on over 1000 first year students from 10 Schools participating annually.
- The Independent Work Experience Module (IWE) is an innovative module designed for students to reflect upon their experiential learning in the world of work, and is closely linked to PDP. Half of all Schools have embedded or are developing the module; last year 363 students undertook School-based work experience modules.
- Degree-based placements – Exeter provides 300-400 placement opportunities per year with businesses and other organisations as

part of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. This number has been rising steadily.

- Graduate School Skills Programme has this year successfully trialled a variety of different Skills Training activities and this will be strengthened by the new appointment of a Director for Postgraduate Skills Training.
- Personal Development Planning - Integrating all the opportunities for students to develop their employability, the main vehicle is a web-based self-appraisal form and development plan. Involvement is mandatory for all first year undergraduates, in all subject areas, through the Personal Tutorial System. All academics across the institution will be involved.

### **Extra-curricula activities**

A range of accredited and assessment activities, encouraging reflective learning and supporting the publicity and ethos of employability, include:

- STEP Programme - Exeter is one of the largest providers in the UK currently providing 30-40 placements per year.
- The Graduate Business Partnership (GBP), a placement programme for 50 graduates annually, which includes a bespoke training programme resulting in the Graduate Employability Award.
- Guild of Students (NUS) offers around 500 volunteering opportunities each year, many in local charities. Students can gain the Exeter Personal Development Award for their achievements.
- We are the UK's largest provider of the Student Associate Scheme to provide taster opportunities for undergraduates to see at first hand the challenges of becoming a School Teacher. This scheme is massively over subscribed, with 450 students participating in 2003-04.

## **6. Strategy for implementing policy**

The development process has, until recently, been fairly *ad hoc*, with committed individuals bringing new ideas to the institution that have subsequently been adopted centrally. Or conversely with initiatives being instigated from the centre and Schools encouraged to adopt them. The Employability Co-ordinator is responsible for identifying gaps in provision and for bringing new ideas to the Employability Group.

The responsibility for implementation is set out in the Employability Strategy (Appendix 1). This strategy articulates with the Learning and

Teaching Strategy; this is important for some academics to understand the value that the University places on these issues.

Staff heavily involved in the provision of curricula activities are based in the Learning and Teaching Support Centre (LaTiS), Business Relations Office and Careers Advisory Service. Provision for extra-curricula activities are centred around the Guild of Students, Business Relations Office and Careers Advisory Service. Implementation is monitored and reported on annually by the Employability Co-ordinator, to the Employability Group, Learning and Teaching Committee, Student Affairs Committee and Business Relations Strategy Group.

The approach to win hearts and minds has been, in some Schools, slow and fairly painful. Once we have a foot in the door the agenda often snowballs. All it takes is for one, vocal person, to see the value of the employability agenda to make all the difference. Sometimes it is not the Careers and Employability Representative, but someone entirely different who champions the agenda within a School.

Once academics realise that they are all already involved in 'teaching employability' through presentations and small group work for example, and that it does not detract from, but instead enhances a student's independence, confidence and ability to tackle their work, they often welcome other aspects of the employability agenda into the curriculum.

Both the current and previous Employability Co-ordinators have formerly been academics from within this institution. The power of having an academic in this role lies in the understanding that such a person can bring to the ways of working in the University, curriculum developments and the context of change, whilst understanding and meeting the needs of employers.

## **7. Costs**

Since 1996, we have successfully bid for over £1M from a variety of sources including the Dti, SRB, AESP and SW RDA, to provide project placement and work experience opportunities. In addition, since 1994 we have secured over £800K from BP, BT, HEFCE, ESRC, DfEE, DfES, HEROBaC, HEIF and HEACF, amongst others, as well as money awarded internally through the Teaching Development Fund, for research and development, curriculum developments and other related extra-curricula activities. This enables us to have the funds to pay for research projects, employ STEP and Graduate Business Partnership

students to work on employability-related projects, market our activities internally.

The post of the Employability Co-ordinator was initially funded by HERoBAC for three years. We have had 6 months of this post funded by HEIF and the next two years will be funded through the Widening Participation budget.

Other staff involved from the Careers Advisory Service, LaTiS and Business Relations Office do not have their time costed into employability-activities, but undertake such activities as part of their normal duties.

## **8. Problems encountered and how they were overcome/are being tackled**

The major problem has been reticence to become involved and a perception that employability isn't 'the problem' of Schools but that it is something the Careers Advisory Service should deal with. This perception is changing with the support of Senior Management, persistence and time.

Some Schools have taken the view that the post of Careers and Employability Representative is an unimportant administrative role that should not be held in high regard. This has resulted in a lack of attendance at meetings, difficulties in engaging in dialogue with the Employability Co-ordinator and a general lack of participation. This can only change with different personnel in post and the support and encouragement of their Heads of School. For change to come about, the support of the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching has been essential to persuade Heads of School of the importance of their involvement. Other high profile activities have included presentations by the Employability Co-ordinator to Senior Management, staff development sessions for Heads of School and presentations to Faculty Boards. These serve to raise the profile of the agenda and give the Heads of Schools the chance to question the Employability Co-ordinator about any aspect that concerns them.

One other fundamental problem has been the short-term nature of funding of various posts and projects which means that it can be difficult to develop a long term vision for the support we would like to provide for students both within the curriculum and through extra-curricula activities.

## **9. Perceived benefits and evidence of outcomes**

One of the major achievements is having pan-institution dialogue about these issues, with every member of academic staff being aware of them, particularly through the PDP process. Students make sense of the links between study, work experience, skill development through supported reflective processes.

The recent QAA institutional audit and internal Subject and Programme Quality Reviews have provided positive feedback that our approaches work (Appendix 2). The 2003 White Paper on the Future of Higher Education highlighted the University of Exeter as a leading example of an institution building strong and productive relationships with business and the community.

We have a long history of the careful evaluation and monitoring of projects which gives us an important understanding of what works and why. Feedback is gathered from both students and staff and is consistently positive from both parties (Appendix 2). An annual Careers & Employability Audit has been conducted for the past two years giving us comprehensive data on curriculum developments relating to employability and PDP. This enables us to identify which Schools may need additional support over each forthcoming academic year.

All Schools are involved in the delivery of Personal and Key skills to students through a variety of curriculum initiatives, with every module being underpinned by the assessment of skills and self-reflection on each student's development.

Overall increased retention and progression is demonstrated by a model in Engineering, where curriculum redesign coupled with in-depth student monitoring and the introduction of the team development programme has reduced a 36% drop out rate in 2000 to 12% in 2003. This benefits students, staff and employers.

The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) has recognised excellent practice in our PDP system and intends to use a modified version of it for its Student Associate Scheme in the next academic year.

## **10. What remains to be done?**

An institutional reorganisation is planned for August 2004 bringing the Careers Advisory Service and Business Relations office closer together.

This will create a more robust relationship with employers and strengthen employability activity on campus.

We must further develop our employability portfolio to consolidate and extend current activity. The best way to achieve this next phase is to further integrate it with the University's connections with business, community and knowledge enterprise. We would like to develop modules to support entrepreneurial students and better prepare the entire student population for the worlds of work in all their various forms. Developing better links with business, through industrial mentoring, for example, will lead to more direct links with business for staff and students and inform both teaching and research synergies.

## **11. How generalisable is the policy/strategy/innovation to other institutions**

We have found the support of Senior Management to be invaluable in convincing some academics of the value of these issues. The dialogue across the institution is replicable, but perhaps our most unusual feature is our very strong relationship with the Guild of Students. It is important to emphasise that this is not just a 'careers' issue, but affects everyone working across the whole institution that has an interest in student development.

## **12. What should be done differently if this were to be begun anew?**

Securing longer term funding from the outset for projects and posts would ensure job security and continuity, and properly demonstrate the commitment of the Institution.

We would try to engage with more academics from the outset. However, it is practically only possible to work with a few at once and inevitably managing change is a slow process.

## **Author/presenters contact information**

Name/

Dr Dawn Lees Employability Co-ordinator
--

Department

Address  
Including postcode

Phone

Fax

Email address

Web address (URL) to enable access to additional relevant material.

## **Additional Material**

Appendix 1: Employability Strategy

Appendix 2: Feedback on activities