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“Why won’t they Engage in Extra-Curricula Opportunities?”: Demystifying the complexity of the student experience in preparing for the future of work

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With 91 applications for every graduate scheme role (ISE, 2021) we often hear that “a degree is not enough” to secure a graduate-level role. Understanding that the graduate market is challenging, students expect university will equip them with the skills, knowledge and creativity needed to transition from education into the ever-changing world of work (The Edge Foundation, 2021). However, for many, there remains a gap between their current skillset and the expectations of graduate recruiters.

To meet the expectation, careers workshops, academic writing classes, field trips, well-being webinars are all offered to students in most universities across the world. In fact, experiential learning opportunities and support services are fundamental to helping students succeed in their studies and later graduate outcomes. Yet, academics and professional service staff across the sector frequently share their frustration that students are not engaging in the opportunities available, particularly when so much time, effort and expense has been spent on arranging them. But why?

In a recent survey to final year students, one university listed a large number of extra-curricula activities and support services available to them. The majority of students (87%) selected the option ‘*I have heard of this but never accessed the service*’. Students were invited to a focus group to discuss their views further, somewhat unsurprisingly, very few engaged. However, those that did explained a number of barriers to engagement. We know about these barriers already and our solution is often to provide even more extra-curricula opportunities to paper over the cracks.

There is a challenging dynamic between the opportunities provided, the recognised need for those opportunities and the lack of engagement in the opportunities provided in their current format, this creates a challenge for university staff. Further, the expectations of recruiters that value activities undertaken outside of the curriculum above those within is difficult for students. Recruiters often appear to use extra-curricular engagement as a proxy for identifying, in their view, the most committed students.

The pandemic has highlighted the complexity of our students’ lives, but engaging students with activities outside of their immediate studies was a problem long before Covid arrived. The situation may be different depending on the demographic of students, from our experience at modern universities, students are frequently juggling a lot of responsibilities alongside their studies.

Many have limited financial support or are required to support their families, and have to work long hours beside their studies racing from lectures to their next shift. In some cases, missing their teaching completely in favour of additional income opportunities or precarious, unstructured contractual employment commitments. Internships are often promoted to support students in gaining skills and enhancing their CV, yet with almost half of organisations offering unpaid internships (Sutton Trust, 2018), it is a socially exclusive opportunity.

Students are often caregivers for siblings or older relatives; many have children themselves. An all-expenses paid field trip to New York might sound like an unmissable experience to many, but if it clashes with the school run, it excludes some.

We need to stop making assumptions about a students' lack of commitment to their studies. For some, the motivation to study may not be driven by career ambition but by personal development and individual circumstances. It may be the case that completing the core elements of their degree with balancing all their other responsibilities is already an achievement; additional activities are simply not an option. So, what can we do?

If it is essential, it must be embedded it into to curriculum

Embedding opportunities into the curriculum ensures no student is excluded from accessing the opportunity. Where the opportunity is aligned to authentic experiences, such as live case studies and contemporary organisational issues, inclusion in the curriculum has the added benefit of ensuring they are working with a broader peer group and learning from more diversity of experience; often not the case with extra-curricular activities. This in turn supports national and local skills agendas (Department for Education, 2021). As many students are working, there are opportunities to develop more innovative learner experiences and assessment which actively encourage students to reflect upon their current real-world experiences rather than seeing them as entirely separate entities.

Advance HE (2020), in their framework for embedding employability, demonstrate that embedded opportunities allow the inclusion of space and support for development beyond the direct skills gained from the experience to include a focus on areas such as reflection. Further support for students, such as developing strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing, also have significantly more benefit when placed within the curriculum, for example through personal and continuing professional development modules. Universities often offer whole suites of workshops and training on mental health and wellbeing, but accessibility will be enhanced if this is part of, rather than outside, the curriculum (Houghton and Anderson, 2017)

The skills and confidence arising from exposing more students to these opportunities through adopting an embedded approach are transferable and thus can have a positive impact on improving student satisfaction, graduate readiness, and assessment performance. Numerous employers overtly state that they are looking at graduate applications to see

what transferable skills or experiences students can bring to the role and this is often used to differentiate those who successfully obtain interviews and those that do not.

Given the complexity of student lives, combined with the ever-increasing need to demonstrate something 'extra', we suggest that the way to minimise inequality of experience is to ensure that all essentials skills, knowledge and capabilities are embedded into the curriculum through more innovative and authentic programme design.

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