



Using skills to develop competence in the workplace

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Summary

An exploration of the way in which key skills can be used to develop a student's competence in the workplace and assist both academic and workplace tutors in assessing work experience. This draws on the experiences of the SIP (Sociologists in Placements) Project, a FDTL project concerned with the placement experience for Social Science students.

Biography

Chris Cann (chris.cann@unn.ac.uk) is the project co-ordinator for the SIP Project based at the University of Northumbria where she has lectured in Communication and Writing Development as well as being a Key Skills Adviser in the Quality Enhancement Unit. She is currently delivering Key Skills training to schools and colleges as part of the Learning and Skills Development Agency's (LASDA) and the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE) Key Skills Support Programme.

Keywords

Core skills, transferable skills, key skills, Dearing Report, competence, work experience, Sociologists in Placements Project, QAA, experience works, students in school, CONTEXT.

Introduction

Developing skills in students is not new - there have been many initiatives in recent years focussing on basic skills, core skills, personal transferable skills and key skills aimed at different audiences both locally and nationally. Many of these initiatives develop from the employers' demands for students to enter the workforce ready equipped with a portfolio of transferable skills. These have included ground-breaking work undertaken by the Ability Based Curriculum (ABC) group of which the University of Northumbria was an active member.

Background

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997 (Dearing Report), stated that, although many employers seek graduates with highly specialised knowledge and skills, they are also concerned about their general capabilities and potential and are often looking for rounded but adaptable employees who can successfully take on a range of tasks and be effective members of a team. Dearing reported a need for higher education to do more to develop a range of skills in students and advocated that all programmes should help students to develop capabilities that they will need beyond higher education. As well as proficiency in communication, numeracy and information technology, Dearing emphasised the need for graduates to be flexible and adaptable, to work in teams, to be able to shape their own development and career, and to develop the practice of planning, managing and taking responsibility for their own learning.

Dearing stated: *All institutions of higher education should aim for student achievement in key skills to be an outcome for all programmes and identifies four key skills:*

- communication
- numeracy
- the use of information technology
- learning how to learn

Recommendation 21 stated: " institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a ' programme specification ' which identifies potential stopping - off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:

- the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;
- key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;
- cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
- subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills."

Dearing also recommended that all undergraduates should have a structured period of work experience outside the institution, with clear learning objectives.

Work experience and higher education

One way in which Higher Education can meet this demand is through offering a range of well-structured work experiences to its students. Work experience offers a significant route to developing a range of graduate attributes and plays an important role in augmenting the higher education learning experience. Work experience is a process that is part of the whole spectrum of learning.

Sociologists in placements project (SIP)

The SIP (Sociologists in Placements) Project (www.unn.ac.uk/academic/ss/sip), a HEFCE supported programme through the FDTL programme (www.ncteam.ac.uk) explores the opportunities available to Sociology students to undertake work experience. One aspect of the SIP Project involved looking at the development of key skills during work experience. This resulted in the identification of good practice and the recognition of the usefulness of skills identification and development during work experience and then in curriculum development to incorporate the skills into the discipline. Placement Practice, a Learning Resources Pack (www.unn.ac.uk/academic/ss/sip) produced by the SIP Project offers examples of good practice and looks at the development of skills as an intrinsic form of assessment. The SIP Project has also developed an online placement handbook that uses a skills assessment approach to developing a learning contract and to facilitate self-assessment throughout the placement.

The QAA (www.qaa.ac.uk) benchmarking activities requires all subject areas to develop benchmark statements for their discipline which react to the needs of the modern workplace and gives further support to the importance of skills development. There are many excellent examples of innovative work in Higher Education designed to encourage students to develop the skills required by employers. The following summarises a few of the many examples:

- Experience Works (www.experienceworks.ncl.ac.uk), one of the DfEE (www.dfes.gov.uk) employability projects explored the way in which students can make use of their vacation and voluntary work in order to develop a range of skills and to gain academic credit.
- Students into Schools (www.ncl.ac.uk/sis) gives students the opportunity to work alongside teachers in local schools, typically for one half-day each week for about ten weeks. This provides the opportunity to develop transferable skills valued by employers and to undertake a process of self- assessment with regards to skills development.
- CONTEXT (<http://context.tlsu.leeds.ac.uk>) provides advice and assistance in the development and use of case study materials. The CASE project gives examples of how real life situations can be harnessed to the academic curricula of non-vocational subjects, for example, the students of the University of Newcastle Politics Department organised an Environmental Issues Conference as part of a twenty credit level three module.
- The voluntary sector provides many opportunities for skills development and there are a number of established national schemes in operation as well as individual institutions providing their own, for example the DfEE's Millennium Volunteers Initiative.

Curriculum 2000

Students entering higher education in 2002 will be used to working with key skills and accustomed to identifying opportunities to develop these skills and providing evidence of their competence in these skills. The close emphasis on skills development within the new Curriculum 2000 provision offers an excellent platform for students to consider how they can develop their skills in Higher Education and in the workforce. These changes within the 16-19 curriculum forces

higher education to look closely at their admissions process, for not only is there a new suite of qualifications and accompanying UCAS points, there is also the opportunity for students to be awarded UCAS points for their key skills qualifications (www.ucas.ac.uk). From 2000, students have been able to identify and develop their competency in the key skills of Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology within the new National Framework of Qualifications. The above mentioned skills make up the new Key Skills Qualification obtained by completion of a portfolio and external assessment. The other three skills are known as the wider key skills and these can be separately certificated by completion of a portfolio and are not externally assessed. Further information and examples of the external assessments can be found on QCA's (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) website at www.qca.org.uk/keyskills. Further information about key skills in schools and colleges can be found in the Key Skills Support Programme (www.keyskillssupport.net) funded by the Department for Education and Employment and LASDA (www.LSagency.org.uk). The support programme provides training as well as practical solutions, exemplars and models to assist in the delivery, management and assessment of the new qualification.

Conclusion

Clearly, the key skills agenda is still developing and the work undertaken by the Curriculum 2000 initiative has an enormous impact on higher education. There is tremendous opportunity to link this work with existing key skills initiatives in Higher Education and to look for opportunities to further develop these links in the future.