Aston Business School

Good Practice Guide in Learning and Teaching

Volume 8

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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

The evidence of reflection and good practice in Learning and Teaching in Aston Business School continues to surprise and delight. Reviewing the now over 70 articles which have been produced over the 8 volumes, two things emerge. Firstly, teaching practices and innovation have been developed over the past nine years. Secondly, a number of key themes remain central to Learning and Teaching practice and research at Aston. You might even say that these are what characterise the expertise of Aston in this area - engagement with technology to assist the teaching process, development of employability skills, and the development of intercultural awareness.

Volume Eight of the Aston Business School Good Practice Guide is no exception. Three articles engage with technology. The articles by Greasley, Crawshaw and Kelly all use aspects of technology linked with our VLE Blackboard™. Looking back at earlier volumes of this Guide, they all indicate a move to a more sophisticated engagement with the VLE beyond just putting up material. Greasley examines aspects of an increasing trend towards providing textbooks online. This will begin to solve the resource issues of providing large numbers of books in the Library for large student groups. Crawshaw discusses mechanisms which encourage students to engage in the learning process. Kelly does the same, and both consider the amount of extra intervention needed by the lecturers to take full advantage of technology. It is not an easy option, but used appropriately it can bring great results in terms of engagement.

Ainsworth, Wheeler and Hutchinson address softer skills acquisition. The relationship between employability in a global workforce has never been as strong. The articles discuss ways in which students can be encouraged to develop key employment skills. Ainsworth additionally discusses the needs of a diverse student learning population which many of us are experiencing in the classroom. Hutchinson describes how to support individuals from a non-privileged background through a career in law.

Finally, Bullivant and Higson touch on an increasingly important topic – the link between expectations and reality. As we move towards an increasingly marketised HE environment, in which students regard themselves as customers, we need to pay heed to the messages in this paper. We need to manage the expectations of all students, but we also need continuously to review our provision and ensure it is fit for purpose.

By request, we have included a short summary of each article below:

An alternative to Blackboard™? Student use of web-based textbook teaching and learning material	This paper investigates the use of web-based textbook supplementary teaching and learning materials which include multiple choice test banks, animated demonstrations, simulations, quizzes and electronic versions of the text. To gauge their experience of the web-based material students were asked to score the main elements of the material in terms of usefulness.
Utilising the Blackboard™ discussion forum for developmental feedback	This short paper provides a brief summary of the use of the Blackboard™ VLE 'Discussion Forum' function during the running of a postgraduate module. The paper outlines the reasons for using this technology, the benefits and limitations, and how to use this in teaching in the future.
Expectations and perceptions: the rhetoric and reality of the Aston Business School Placement Programme	This article follows on from the key findings of an MBA research project (on aspects of service quality within the Placement Programme at Aston Business School), enabling data to be gathered in respect one of these key findings: *'No formal mechanisms are currently in place to gain insights into students' expectations of the service*.' Analysis has been undertaken to ascertain the extent of the gaps between the expected service and perceived/received service.

Enhancing employability skills in environmental management students through learning innovation	The growing emphasis on employability skills development has encouraged academics to consider how such skills can be embedded into the curriculum. In environmental management programmes graduate attributes are frequently developed through laboratory and fieldwork that is implicit within the discipline. This paper considers how those skills can be further developed through learning innovation, and particularly through innovative assessment design. A number of examples are provided to illustrate how graduate skills can be enhanced
Teaching intercultural communication to postgraduate students in Aston Business School	This paper takes you through the development of a twenty week module on intercultural communications showing the module contents and the outcomes to date. In developing the module it was decided to take a longitudinal approach so that students have the opportunity throughout the taught course to reflect on and revisit issues they find themselves dealing with.
Assessed group presentations in a final year module	This article reports on how a group assessment is designed (previously it was not assessed), in particular the detailed information provided to the students at the outset of the module. Then, the article highlights the significant impact switching to assessed presentations has had on student engagement in the learning process.
Old problem, new solution? Are Anti Plagiarism Software packages the answer to students' academic misconduct?	This paper briefly discusses the author's own experiences and reflects upon the use of Turnitin in a very large class and the implications it has for future practice. The use of devises, such as Turnitin, may superficially help to address plagiarism. To be effective, however, electronic systems require to be located within an institutional strategy that also engages preventative measures in the first instance and to balance academic discretion with the requirement that all students are treated fairly.
Why social mobility matters: E-mentoring in law, a strategic plan	The law e-mentoring scheme aims to support individuals from non-privileged backgrounds in navigating a career in law; whilst at the same time allowing our own law students to augment leadership skills which will further enhance their employability. This project envisages the provision of a lasting human contact, that the mentees can turn to for advice along the way. As the mentees career path develops so too will the mentors, providing current advice and long term support. The objective is to illustrate the usefulness of a logical strategic planning process to the most modest educational leadership and management activities.

This Good Practice Guide continues to be linked with ABS's Research Centre in Higher Education Learning and Management (HELM). One of the highlights of HELM activity each year is its seminar series. A list of the HELM seminars for 2010/2011 is listed in ***Appendix 1*** of this publication. This year we have reduced the number of seminars and introduced an annual Learning and Teaching Symposium, held in March 2010.
(http://www1.aston.ac.uk/aston-business-school/research/centres/helm/).

Further details can be obtained from Selena Teeling (s.teeling@aston.ac.uk), who coordinates the HELM seminars. Suggested journals rankings to guide ABS staff who wish to publish in this area are set out in ***Appendix 2***.

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AN ALTERNATIVE TO BLACKBOARD™? STUDENT USE OF WEB-BASED TEXTBOOK TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIAL

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of web-based textbook supplementary teaching and learning materials which include multiple choice test banks, animated demonstrations, simulations, quizzes and electronic versions of the text. To gauge their experience of the web-based material students were asked to score the main elements of the material in terms of usefulness. In general it was found that while the electronic text provides a flexible platform for presentation of material there is a need for continued monitoring of student use of this material as the literature suggests that digital viewing habits may mean there is little time spent in evaluating information, either for relevance, accuracy or authority. From a lecturer perspective these materials may provide an effective and efficient way of presenting teaching and learning materials to the students in a variety of multimedia formats, but at this stage do not overcome the need for a VLE such as Blackboard™.

Introduction

This paper evaluates the experience of using technology in the form of a web-based textbook supplementary material in the context of facilitating student learning in the subject area of Operations Management. The use of the web-based textbook sites are similar to the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) such as Blackboard™ in that they provide a platform for the use of multimedia material to assist in student learning activities. Whilst a VLE, however, generally requires material to be generated and placed on the web site by the tutor, a web-based textbook site provides extensive content and the tutor is simply required to select and organise this material as appropriate for their needs. Although studies have investigated the use of virtual learning environments in recent years (Greasley et al , 2004; Ho et al, 2008) and the use of web-based teaching materials (Karuppan, 2001) there is little evidence presented regarding the use of web-based textbook material. The main aim of the study described here was to establish the experience of web-based textbook material for students attending traditional face-to-face courses in the subject area of Operations Management.

The study will focus on the extensive library of web-based learning materials available on the 'WileyPLUS' web platform which accompanies the textbook 'Operations Management', 2nd edition authored by A. Greasley and published by John Wiley and Sons Ltd. Students can obtain access to the WileyPLUS system either by purchasing the text book which is packaged with a registration code or by purchasing a digital version of the textbook which essentially provides access to WileyPLUS without a printed book. Many other book publishers offer similar platforms such as Pearson Education (www.pearsoned-ema.com) and McGraw-Hill (www.mhhe.com). WileyPLUS is used in over 34 European Universities and by over 500,000 students. It is used for distance learning as well as face-to-face courses. The main aims of the WileyPLUS system are to administer and manage courses easily, automate the assigning and grading of homework, create media-rich class presentations, immerse and engage students in a structured, dynamic learning environment and offer students additional practice with instant feedback. To meet these aims WileyPLUS is organised around the essential activities performed in class such as to create class presentations using the online resources provided and to automate the assigning and grading of homework or quizzes.

The Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire devised for this project consisted of two sections of background information and experience of using the WileyPLUS system. The background information section contains information on respondent in terms of the age category, gender, year of study and module details. The experience of the WileyPLUS section asked students to rate the main features of the WileyPLUS system on a Likert type system on a scale of 1 to 5. Additional questions were posed in order to obtain qualitative responses to the students' experiences of the WileyPLUS system. The questionnaires were only distributed in paper form during a lecture to avoid bias towards students who were more proficient and enthusiastic users of the WileyPLUS system. The total number of questionnaires returned in this pilot study was 32. Statistical analysis of the questionnaires comprised running frequencies of all responses, both in actual and percentage terms. All of the qualitative responses have been grouped into similar themes and the frequency of each theme has been counted.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire found that 44% of students had bought the textbook and 56% had not. Reasons for not buying the textbook were thematised into 'available for nothing in the library', 'too expensive' and 'available online'. The questionnaire also found that in terms of usage of the WileyPLUS system 44% of respondents indicated they had experience of the site and 56% indicated they had not used the website. Reasons for not using the site were thematised into 'forgot, no time', 'not needed, have the book' and 'unaware of how to access'. Those who indicated usage of WileyPLUS ranked their usefulness of its facilities as below (***Table 1***).

Table 1. Experience of the WileyPLUS website

WileyPLUS features	Mean Score (1 = not useful, 5 = extremely useful)
Online Book (chapter text, exercises , further reading)	4.00
Online Book (chapter case studies)	4.15
Practice Quizzes	3.85
Interactive Gallery (Flashcards)	3.75
Video Clips	3.54
Animated Worked Example	3.85
Virtual Tours	3.73
Simulations	3.75
Test Banks	3.83
Learning Experience of WileyPlus	3.77

It can be seen in the responses to the questionnaire that only 44% of students had bought the textbook for the module. The main reason for this given by the students related to the cost of the textbook and the use of alternative strategies to obtain the textbook at no cost by use of the library or use of the online version of the text supplied with WileyPLUS. This latter option, however, will not be available in the future as WileyPLUS will only be available with purchase of the text. At this stage it seems uncertain whether the text web materials will increase student interest in purchasing the textbook or whether the statement 'many of our students do believe that everything they need to know is on the Web and that it's all free' (Frand, 2000) is true and a culture of not paying for content will mean students increasingly rely on free content such as library material and websites offering free learning material. The experience of using WileyPLUS also represents 44% of the student cohort (although not necessarily the same students as used the textbook as in this instance WileyPLUS access was provided to all students). Most students indicated they would access WileyPLUS at some point, maybe for revision purposes and a few students seemed to view the textbook as all they required for their studies. This may indicate that most students will use the supplementary materials provided at some point but may require some encouragement to do so during the delivery of the module.

In terms of their experience of the WileyPLUS site students were asked to score the main elements of the system on a scale of 1-5 in terms of usefulness (see ***Table 1***). All elements received a score of at least 3.5 indicating that students value the range of materials provided in helping them understand the applied concepts covered in Operations Management. The highest scores were for the online book text (4.00) and the online chapter case studies (4.15). The popularity of the online version of the text may seem surprising if students already have the printed version. It may be expected that students would use the alternative media such as videos and virtual tours. There is evidence that the "Google generation" use, as first port of call for knowledge, the internet and facilities such as Google and

Wikipedia, rather than earlier generations who gained their knowledge through books and libraries (Rowlands et al., 2008). This is particularly significant because information seeking behaviour in a digital domain is often characterised by skimming through web sites (viewing one or two pages and then moving on), spending a large proportion of time on navigating web sites as opposed to viewing content and quickly browsing text for a few minutes rather than prolonged reading (CIBER, 2007). This may explain why students value an electronic version of the text in which they can use the web hyperlink method of navigation through the material. While the electronic text provides a flexible platform for presentation of material and provides advantages such as the ability for direct links to alternative learning materials such as practice quizzes and animated examples, there is evidence that the digital viewing habits outlined may mean there is little time spent in evaluating information, either for relevance, accuracy or authority (Williams and Rowlands, 2007).

Conclusion

The use of web-based textbook material is growing with book publishers providing increasingly sophisticated and extensive supplementary materials to support tutors and students. These resources provide an interesting alternative to the widespread use of Virtual Learning Environments such as Blackboard™ which are populated with materials produced by tutors. What emerged from this preliminary study is that the students value web-based textbook supplementary materials such as video clips and practice quizzes, but what they value most is the electronic version of the textbook content. This preference may reflect the habits of the ‘Google generation’ but the literature does question the effectiveness of a digital rather than a paper-based teaching and learning medium. This study has focused upon the student perspective of the textbook material but from a lecturer perspective these materials may provide an effective and efficient way of presenting teaching and learning materials to the students in a variety of multimedia formats. The software also provides aides for formative and summative assessment such as test banks of subject-oriented questions. These systems, however, are unlikely to replace a VLE, such as Blackboard™, as the primary platform for presenting teaching and learning materials as they are only available to students who purchase the text in either paper or digital form.

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Example used with students attending traditional face-to-face courses in Operations Management.

UTILISING THE BLACKBOARD™ DISCUSSION FORUM FOR DEVELOPMENTAL FEEDBACK

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Introduction

This short paper provides a brief summary of my use of the Blackboard™ VLE ‘Discussion Forum’ function during the running of the postgraduate module, Strategic Human Resource Management and Performance (BHM510) in Term 2 of the 2009/10 academic year. I had only recently joined Aston Business School in 2009 and this was my first running of this module. The paper outlines my reasons for using this technology, the felt benefits and limitations, and how I intend to use this in my teaching going forward.

Aims and details of the intervention

The first thing to note is that this is a relatively large postgraduate module with cohorts of between 80 and 100 students each year. As a result, direct communication with, and feedback to, students can often be difficult outside of the taught sessions and the formal assessments. I introduced the online discussion forum as an additional mechanism through which I could communicate directly with students and, perhaps more importantly students could communicate with other students (and not just their closer friends and colleagues), throughout the module.

In particular, I focussed its use around the assignment task which, for this module, is group based. Discussions, therefore, were between groups rather than individuals. The aim was to get students to share their ideas, problems, questions, successes, failures (anything really) regarding the assignment task, thus aiding the dissemination of knowledge throughout the class. Discussions were initially set up by me. I challenged the groups to post (within the first three weeks of the module) at least one message outlining up to three major challenges they were facing regarding their assignment – with the guarantee that I would respond and provide feedback to all those who posted a message. I also encouraged other groups to respond to these messages and provide any advice and guidance that they could bring. From this starting point, groups were required to access the forum weekly to check messages and where relevant respond and contribute to ongoing discussions. I also checked this forum weekly and where appropriately provided relevant information, feedback or guidance. This, of course, also requires some regular policing by the module leader to ensure the quality of information and the appropriateness of discussions is upheld.

Benefits and limitations

On the whole the students appeared to be reasonably engaged with this form of communication and feedback with a significant number of groups contributing at least something. A number of students reported anecdotally that they had found this a useful source of information, guidance and feedback regarding the assignment. They also reported that it had been useful to see that other groups were sharing similar problems and issues to themselves. Other positives included the very responsible way that students had used this forum with no problems emerging regarding its content.

There were, however, a number of limitations. Not all groups engaged with this activity, with many not posting any message at all – despite regular prompting. Moreover, the desire for more spontaneous discussion and sharing of information between groups failed to materialise. Indeed, the interactions on this forum were consistently between the groups and me. Knowledge was still shared but only through the ability to observe the conversations that I was having with other groups, which may be the main benefit of this function. Instead of having to respond to a large number of emails asking the same or similar questions, it is hope that individuals and groups accessed these open communications and thus get their information and guidance more readily. I have no hard evidence that my email communications regarding the assignment were lower than what may be expected but there is some anecdotal evidence that students were accessing this information.

Going forward

I definitely found this useful and so did a number of the students. As a result, I will be using this technology again this year in the same module. I intend to use it in a very similar way but I will also use this as a forum for providing module-level developmental feedback regarding the assessment of the group assignment. In other words, to provide feedback to students before they sit their exam at the end of the module. I also intend to gather feedback more systematically from the students regarding this technology, its utility and any suggestions for its use in the future running of the module.

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Example used with BHM510: Strategic Human Resource Management and Performance

EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS: THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF THE ASTON BUSINESS SCHOOL PLACEMENT PROGRAMME – SUPPORT SERVICE AND PLACEMENT YEAR.

NICOLA BULLIVANT

HELEN HIGSON

Background

With the move from an élite Higher Education system in the UK to a mass system and with the introduction of a revised fee structure, students' expectations of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as service providers have increased (Basne H, 1992). These expectations permeate the support structures within HEIs and raise a number of critical questions for educationalists to consider. How can we better manage students' expectations? How can meet students' expectations? If expectations are better managed, does this lead to a more satisfactory student experience?

Recent research (an MBA project/dissertation) has been undertaken on aspects of service quality within the Placement Programme at Aston Business School (ABS). The key findings from this were:

1. The espoused service process type (i.e. what the service is described as to prospective students) and the service delivered to students are different.
2. The ideal service process type (as perceived by staff) is different to the service which is available to students (as perceived by staff).
3. No formal mechanisms are currently in place to gain insights into students' expectations of the service.
4. Therefore, there is no understanding of the potential gaps in the students' expectations of the service and the perceived service after experiencing it.

This current research follows on from the key findings of the MBA research, enabling data to be gathered in respect of point 3 above. Analysis has been undertaken to ascertain the extent of the gaps between the expected service and perceived/received service (point 4 above).

Literature Review

Students' Expectations

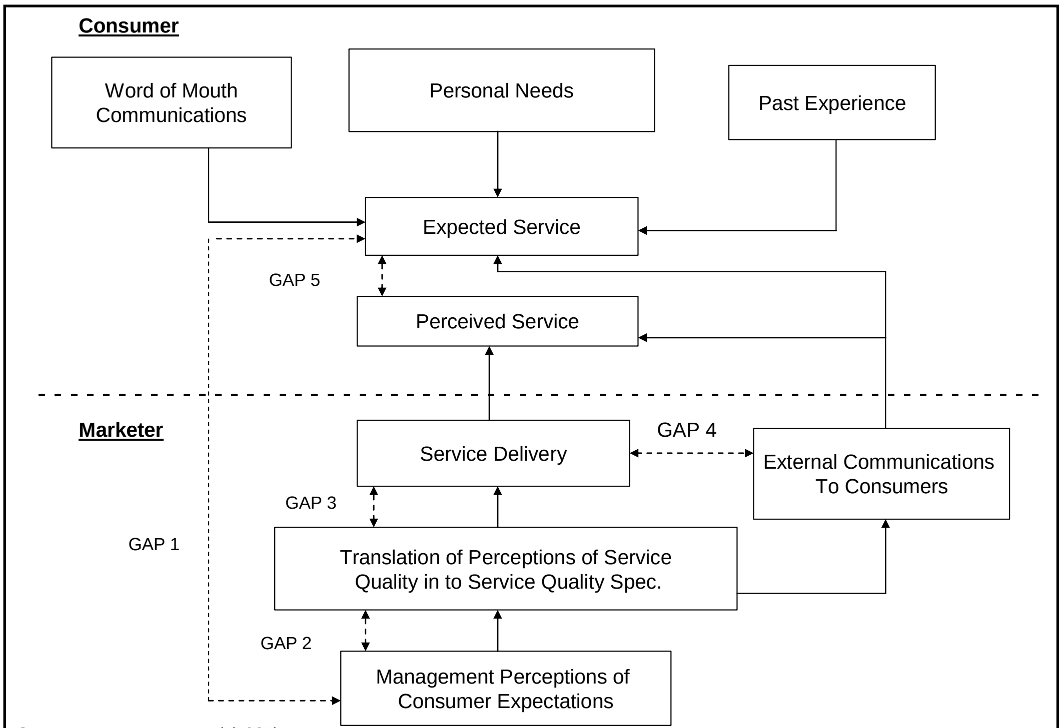
The view of expectations is discussed by a range of authors, including Barnett (1992, p34) who talks of some students having "a dependency orientation, suffering from an overestimate of what can be done for them…in these consumer-oriented times, many quite rightly want their money's worth out of their attendance". Oldfield and Baron (2000, p93-4) conclude in their research that "the service experience that is higher education is complex, and students undergoing higher education likewise have a complex set of expectations".

Managing Expectations

The perceived service quality model (Grönroos, 1993) distinguishes between customers' perceptions and their actual experiences. Zeithaml et al (2006, p34) talk of the expectations which customers bring with them into service encounters, with perceptions being those "subjective assessments of actual service experiences". Therefore, the need to manage customers' expectations is cited as critical (Hill, 1995); for those devising and managing advertising campaigns, promotional materials and websites, service employees need to be mindful that they are not sending out messages about the quality of the service which they might not be able to deliver on (Grönroos, 1993). Parasuraman et al (1985) claim that for those assessing service quality, customers are comparing their expectations with the actual performance of the service they experienced.

According to Johnston and Clark (2005, p109), "there are some customers who have quite unrealistic expectations of some service organisations and can cause a great deal of aggravation and nuisance as a result". The customer, however, is central to the assessment of quality (Dibb and Simkin, 2004; Dibb et al, 2006). Slack et al (2004, p596) emphasise the need to understand quality from the perspective of the customer as "to the customer, the quality of a particular product or service is whatever he or she perceives it to be". The Service Quality Model, developed by Parasuraman et al (1985), offers a framework for understanding this and for exposing the discrepancies or "gaps" between what is expected to be delivered and what is received in reality (see ***Figure 1*** below):

Figure 1.



Source: Parasuraman et al (1985)

From the review of the literature of students' expectations and the need to manage those expectations, and the service quality model above, the question of what expectations do our students have is raised. In addition, where (if any) are the gaps between what students expect of the Aston Business School Placement Office and what they perceive they receive in reality? Furthermore, a tool to measure these expectations and the gap(s) between the rhetoric and reality is required.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions raised, primary research was carried out to gain insights into students' expectations and their perceptions of the Aston Business School placement programme support services. This research was undertaken through online surveys and focus groups.

In the first instance, in order to reach the widest sample of students, ABS students in years one and two were surveyed. This survey was used to ascertain their expectations of the services provided by the Placement Office. In tandem, placement and final year students were also surveyed to understand their perceptions i.e. their actual experience of using the ABS Placement Office services.

Surveys were used initially to allow the researchers to get a sense of the broad picture from these two cohorts of students, under the headlines of "expectations" and "perceptions/experiences".

SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al, 1988) was used as the basis for the survey questionnaire. This tool is designed around the five service quality dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. According to Johnston and Clark (2005, p125), "repeated administration allows an understanding as to how customers' perceived service quality with each of the dimensions is changing over time". O'Neill (2003) supports the need for longitudinal studies of service quality within HEIs.

The data was then evaluated against the five SERVQUAL dimensions as described above. Comparisons were drawn between the expectations students have of the service and their actual experiences of having used it i.e. their perceptions. It was anticipated that gaps could therefore be identified and recommendations made on how to address these gaps, using Parasuraman et al's Service Quality model (1985).

Focus groups were held with both cohorts of students. The focus groups enabled a more detailed and thorough research to be undertaken, to probe beneath the answers students had given to the very structured survey questions answered in the SERVQUAL questionnaire and to enable students to talk more freely about their expectations and experiences. The focus groups lasted between 45-60 minutes and a £15 gift voucher was offered as an incentive to students to take part.

Results and findings

Surveys

The surveys took place in November-December 2009. Response rates to the surveys were relatively low:

1. Expectations = 3.6% (n=65)
2. Perceptions = 4% (n=49)

In each survey, students were asked to rate 22 dimensions on a scale of 1-7, where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree.

Overall, the response rates are both low and disappointing. Likely reasons for the low response rates are survey fatigue – ABS and Aston University students are regularly surveyed to seek their opinions, and this survey took place at a time where other satisfaction questionnaires were being carried out.

Expectations

For a full breakdown of the responses to these questions, please see ***Appendix One***. The five dimensions are further broken down into a total of 22 dimensions as follows:

Tangibles

- Excellent Placement Support Offices will have modern-looking equipment.
- The physical facilities at excellent Placement Support Offices will be visually appealing.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will be neat-appearing.
- Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) will be visually appealing in an excellent Placement Support Office.

Reliability

- When excellent Placement Support Offices promise to do something by a certain time, they will do so.
- When students have a problem, excellent Placement Support Offices will show a sincere interest in solving it.
- Excellent Placement Support Offices will perform the service right the first time.
- Excellent Placement Support Offices will provide their services at the time they promise to do so.
- Excellent Placement Support Offices will insist on error-free records.

Responsiveness

- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will tell students exactly when services will be performed.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will give prompt service to students.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will always be willing to help students.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will never be too busy to respond to students' requests.

Assurance

- The behaviour of employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will instill confidence in students.
- Students using excellent Placement Support Offices will feel safe in their transactions.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will be consistently courteous with students.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will have knowledge to answer students' questions.

Empathy

- Excellent Placement Support Offices will give students individual attention.
- Excellent Placement Support Offices will have operating hours convenient to all their students.
- Excellent Placement Support Offices will have employees who give students personal attention.
- Excellent Placement Support Offices will have the students' best interests at heart.
- Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will understand the specific needs of their students.

Perceptions

For a full breakdown of the responses to these questions, please see ***Appendix Two***. As with expectations, the five dimensions are further broken down into a total of 22 dimensions as aspects (see ***Appendix Three***)

Focus Groups

Two focus groups took place in May 2010:

Focus Group One
1st year and 2nd year students were invited to take part to discuss their expectations of the Placement Office and its services. Five students took part, all female. 4 were EU students, and 1 was a Home student.

Focus Group Two
Placement year and final year students were invited to take part to discuss their perceptions/actual experiences of using the Placement Office and its services. Seven students took part; 3 female and 4 male. 6 were Home students and 1 was an EU student. 6 of the students were in their Final year students and 1 was a placement year student. Qualitative analysis of the focus groups has been carried out. The data has been analysed in terms of the SERVQUAL dimensions, but other key themes have also emerged (see ***Table*** below).

Analysis

Firstly, to summarise the findings at a survey question level, it was found that in all of the statistically significant questions students' perceptions were lower than their expectations of the Placement Office. Secondly, the findings showed that all but the tangible dimension had a statistically significant difference. This meant that on average, the students' perceptions of the reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of the Placement Office, was lower than their expectation.

Furthermore, empathy was noted as having the largest disparity between what students expect and what students perceive they receive. In analyzing the findings from the focus groups, there is a greater need for students to receive more communication/information. Additionally, this information must be unambiguous so that students are receiving a clear message.

Using Parasuraman's service quality model, gap 1 is prevalent i.e. there is a difference between the expected service and the perceived (experienced) service. Gap 5 is also clearly present between "management perceptions of consumer expectations" and the "expected service" (Parasuman et al, 1985) – in other words, those delivering the service are delivering it in a way which they believe is right as opposed to in the way that students (rightly or wrongly) expect. There is also seemingly a gap between external communications to consumers and the service delivery, as students have commented on the messages they have heard (or not) through open days and the prospectus (gap 4).

Theme	Illustrative student quote
Tangibles	"What I found really useful is the placement internet; there is this special… like a file where you can find all the instructions you need, for example, if you want to apply for a university or to search for a job, either abroad or in the UK. Another thing I really find useful was the newsletters we receive, because they list all the events and companies which are coming to Aston University; and the presentations and workshops."
Reliability	"I think there's more than enough professional staff within Aston University able to help or to assist with that kind of advice and support. It's just about utilising it."
Responsiveness	"…from my friends from the second year [I know] the most awful thing is when it's nearly the end of the year and you don't get your placement, so I'm expecting help in this situation; if I don't get anything and have to stay with nothing. So, in a critical situation I'm expecting more help in order to find a placement."
Assurance	"I expect really big help from the Placement Office because the University has a very good reputation for the placement …my expectations are also based upon on things I heard from other people who are second year now (I'm a first year). I expect them to help me if I have any questions all the time; I want to know who I can ask, where I have to go. I expect to have a sort of a booklet with all the steps I have to take…I just want to know everything; step by step information."
Empathy	"..and also, being a Home student, [upon] knowing how England job-seeking works. I didn't really realise that people didn't have the same experiences. That's why I didn't really expect as much as I got from the Placement Office, actually – that they had a lot on offer." "When I went to apply for jobs…there were multinational corporations Microsoft, Aldi… and you'd think, being a Business School, they'd be linked with start-up businesses or students starting up their own business from Aston. It was all massive companies, apart from charities, but… I found a really good charity with only seven people and I applied for that, but then I realised they could only pay me certain amount; there was no extra support…"
Improvement	"The stuff from previous students was pretty good but it was scripted, no matter what company they went to, it was pretty similar what they said. It would've been better if it was more students' actual opinions."
Information/ communication	"There doesn't seem to be a lot written about your placement year in a prospectus or anything. Everything I found out before I came here was from Open days, when they get students to talk about their experiences. It was then that they spoke about placements, rather than it being in a prospectus." **(Researcher**: And what are your expectations based upon?) "Upon experiences of other people; upon prospects (sic) of Aston University… When you apply for a uni, you get a great range of prospects (sic); you see photos of the past students who write "Aston Uni is the best place; I've got the best placement in the world" and so on. So, when we come here, we're expecting the same like these people in prospects (sic). Our expectations are based upon the information which is provided to us."
Clarity/ confusion	"My expectation was to have my CV written in a proper format. But what happened is if I'm second year I [will] need to have my CV checked at the Placement Office. And in the Placement Office when I came to check my CV they said they need to see the job description, because they say that the CV should be tailored to the job we're applying for."

Limitations

It should be noted that the SERVQUAL, as a service quality measurement tool, is designed to be used to measure a) customers' expectations and b) the same customers' perceptions after having used the service. For this study, the same cohort of customers i.e. students, could not be surveyed. This was due to the time factor involved. It was felt that the students needed to have experienced the full service provided by the Placement Office and this therefore meant that students would need to have completed their second year and entered the placement year before they could be expected to comment fully on their experiences/perceptions. It is acknowledged that this is a limitation within the research conducted. The findings do, however, enable the researchers to begin to better understand students' expectations and to identify gaps between these and actual experiences.

Should similar research be conducted in the future, these cohorts of students may be further separated i.e. rather than survey/hold focus groups with 1st and 2nd years together, and with placement year and final year students together, it may be more insightful and more reliable if each year were surveyed separately. It is recognized that there are possibly limitations with the research given the way that students were grouped together.

Future Work

As empathy was identified as having the largest gap between what students expect and what students perceive they receive, further research will be carried out into the role of empathy within the field of Higher Education. A literature review will be conducted.

Repeated administration of the SERVQUAL survey may also be carried out. Students who are in year one and year two currently and who were invited to take part in the expectations survey could be asked to take part in the perceptions survey as they enter the placement year and the final year.
With gaps now indentified, work needs to be undertaken to develop strategies to manage the gaps underscored through this research.

Conclusions

From the research, there are clear differences between what students expect from the Placement Office and what they perceive they receive in reality. This model for measuring the gaps between expectations and perceptions could be applied to any aspect of service provision within the Institution or HEIs, to better inform service providers about the changing picture of what our students want or need. In a currently uncertain future for UK universities, an enhanced understanding of students' needs is salient.

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Appendix 1

Tangibles

No.	Question	Options	Results %	Results n.
1	Excellent Placement Support Offices will have modern-looking equipment.	1	0.0%	0
		2	1.5%	1
		3	10.8%	7
		4	18.5%	12
		5	30.8%	20
		6	20.0%	13
		7	18.5%	12
2	The physical facilities at excellent Placement Support Offices will be visually appealing.	1	0.0%	0
		2	4.6%	3
		3	7.7%	5
		4	18.5%	12
		5	35.4%	23
		6	24.6%	16
		7	9.2%	6
3	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will be neat-appearing.	1	1.5%	1
		2	1.5%	1
		3	3.1%	2
		4	20.0%	13
		5	32.3%	21
		6	23.1%	15
		7	18.5%	12
4	Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) will be visually appealing in an excellent Placement Support Office.	1	0.0%	0
		2	1.5%	1
		3	3.1%	2
		4	13.8%	9
		5	24.6%	16
		6	32.3%	21
		7	24.6%	16

Reliability

No.	Question	Options	Results %	Results n.
5	When excellent Placement Support Offices promise to do something by a certain time, they will do so.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	1.5%	1
		4	4.6%	3
		5	9.2%	6
		6	10.8%	7
		7	73.8%	48
6	When students have a problem, excellent Placement Support Offices will show a sincere interest in solving it.	1	1.5%	1
		2	0.0%	0
		3	1.5%	1
		4	3.1%	2
		5	9.2%	6
		6	13.8%	9
		7	70.8%	46
7	Excellent Placement Support Offices will perform the service right the first time.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	1.5%	1
		4	3.1%	2
		5	13.8%	9
		6	36.9%	24
		7	44.6%	29
8	Excellent Placement Support Offices will provide their services at the time they promise to do so.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	0.0%	0
		4	1.5%	1
		5	7.7%	5
		6	18.5%	12
		7	72.3%	47
9	Excellent Placement Support Offices will insist on error-free records.	1	1.5%	1

		2	0.0%	0
		3	3.1%	2
		4	4.6%	3
		5	20.0%	13
		6	30.8%	20
		7	40.0%	26

Responsiveness

No.	Question	Options	Results %	n.
10	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will tell students exactly when services will be performed.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	4.6%	3
		4	12.3%	8
		5	18.5%	12
		6	24.6%	16
		7	40.0%	26
11	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will give prompt service to students.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	3.1%	2
		4	3.1%	2
		5	21.5%	14
		6	26.2%	17
		7	46.2%	30
12	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will always be willing to help students.	1	0.0%	0
		2	1.5%	1
		3	0.0%	0
		4	1.5%	1
		5	6.2%	4
		6	16.9%	11
		7	73.8%	48
13	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will never be too busy to respond to students' requests.	1	1.5%	1
		2	3.1%	2
		3	3.1%	2
		4	3.1%	2
		5	23.1%	15
		6	27.7%	18
		7	38.5%	25

Assurance

No.	Question	Options	Results %	n.
14	The behaviour of employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will instill confidence in students.	1	1.5%	1
		2	0.0%	0
		3	1.5%	1
		4	4.6%	3
		5	13.8%	9
		6	24.6%	16
		7	53.8%	35
15	Students using excellent Placement Support Offices will feel safe in their transactions.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	0.0%	0
		4	1.5%	1
		5	10.8%	7
		6	30.8%	20
		7	56.9%	37
16	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will be consistently courteous with students.	1	1.5%	1
		2	0.0%	0
		3	1.5%	1
		4	4.6%	3
		5	21.5%	14
		6	29.2%	19
		7	41.5%	27
17	Employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will have knowledge to answer students' questions.	1	0.0%	0
		2	1.5%	1
		3	0.0%	0

		4	1.5%	1
		5	16.9%	11
		6	18.5%	12
		7	61.5%	40

Empathy

No.	Question	Options	Results %	Results n.
18	Excellent Placement Support Offices will give students individual attention.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	0.0%	0
		4	0.0%	0
		5	24.6%	16
		6	24.6%	16
		7	50.8%	33
19	Excellent Placement Support Offices will have operating hours convenient to all their students.	1	0.0%	0
		2	1.5%	1
		3	1.5%	1
		4	7.7%	5
		5	15.4%	10
		6	18.5%	12
		7	55.4%	36
20	Excellent Placement Support Offices will have employees who give students personal attention.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	0.0%	0
		4	3.1%	2
		5	20.0%	13
		6	30.8%	20
		7	46.2%	30
21	Excellent Placement Support Offices will have the students' best interests at heart.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	1.5%	1
		4	4.6%	3
		5	13.8%	9
		6	26.2%	17
		7	53.8%	35
22	The employees of excellent Placement Support Offices will understand the specific needs of their students.	1	0.0%	0
		2	1.5%	1
		3	1.5%	1
		4	3.1%	2
		5	21.5%	14
		6	15.4%	10
		7	56.9%	37

Appendix Two

Tangibles

No.	Question	Options	Results %	Results n.
1	The Placement Support Office has modern-looking equipment.	1	0.0%	0
		2	6.1%	3
		3	6.1%	3
		4	30.6%	15
		5	34.7%	17
		6	20.4%	10
		7	2.0%	1
2	The Placement Support Office's physical facilities are visually appealing.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	10.2%	5
		4	32.7%	16
		5	30.6%	15
		6	18.4%	9
		7	8.2%	4
3	The Placement Support Office's employees are neat-appearing.	1	0.0%	0
		2	2.0%	1

		3	0.0%	0
		4	16.3%	8
		5	24.5%	12
		6	42.9%	21
		7	14.3%	7
4	Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) are visually appealing at the Placement Support Office.	1	0.0%	0
		2	0.0%	0
		3	10.2%	5
		4	22.4%	11
		5	34.7%	17
		6	24.5%	12
		7	8.2%	4

Reliability

No.	Question	Options	Results %	n.
5	When the Placement Support Office promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.	1	2.0%	1
		2	6.1%	3
		3	6.1%	3
		4	12.2%	6
		5	20.4%	10
		6	30.6%	15
		7	22.4%	11
6	When you have a problem, the Placement Support Office shows a sincere interest in solving it.	1	6.1%	3
		2	8.2%	4
		3	10.2%	5
		4	16.3%	8
		5	20.4%	10
		6	18.4%	9
		7	20.4%	10
7	The Placement Support Office performs the service right the first time.	1	0.0%	0
		2	4.1%	2
		3	24.5%	12
		4	16.3%	8
		5	16.3%	8
		6	26.5%	13
		7	12.2%	6
8	The Placement Support Office provides its services at the time it promises to do so.	1	0.0%	0
		2	4.1%	2
		3	10.2%	5
		4	10.2%	5
		5	22.4%	11
		6	32.7%	16
		7	20.4%	10
9	The Placement Support Office insists on error-free records.	1	0.0%	0
		2	4.1%	2
		3	6.1%	3
		4	30.6%	15
		5	20.4%	10
		6	30.6%	15
		7	8.2%	4

Responsiveness

No.	Question	Options	Results %	n.
10	Employees of the Placement Support Office tell you exactly when services will be performed.	1	0.0%	0
		2	10.2%	5
		3	6.1%	3
		4	22.4%	11
		5	24.5%	12
		6	18.4%	9
		7	18.4%	9
11	Employees of the Placement Support Office give you prompt service.	1	0.0%	0
		2	6.1%	3
		3	12.2%	6
		4	12.2%	6

		5	26.5%	13
		6	28.6%	14
		7	14.3%	7
12	Employees of the Placement Support Office are always willing to help you.	1	6.1%	3
		2	6.1%	3
		3	6.1%	3
		4	6.1%	3
		5	20.4%	10
		6	22.4%	11
		7	32.7%	16
13	Employees of the Placement Support Office are never too busy to respond to your requests.	1	2.0%	1
		2	14.3%	7
		3	6.1%	3
		4	10.2%	5
		5	30.6%	15
		6	22.4%	11
		7	14.3%	7

Assurance

No.	Question	Options	Results %	n.
14	The behaviour of employees in the Placement Support Office instills confidence in students	1	2.0%	1
		2	4.1%	2
		3	20.4%	10
		4	12.2%	6
		5	22.4%	11
		6	18.4%	9
		7	20.4%	10
15	You feel safe in your transactions with the Placement Support Office.	1	2.0%	1
		2	2.0%	1
		3	8.2%	4
		4	12.2%	6
		5	14.3%	7
		6	32.7%	16
		7	28.6%	14
16	Employees of the Placement Support Office are consistently courteous with you.	1	2.0%	1
		2	6.1%	3
		3	8.2%	4
		4	12.2%	6
		5	16.3%	8
		6	30.6%	15
		7	24.5%	12
17	Employees of the Placement Support Office have the knowledge to answer your questions.	1	0.0%	0
		2	10.2%	5
		3	6.1%	3
		4	14.3%	7
		5	20.4%	10
		6	30.6%	15
		7	18.4%	9

Empathy

No.	Question	Options	Results %	n.
18	The Placement Support Office gives you individual attention.	1	6.1%	3
		2	2.0%	1
		3	16.3%	8
		4	8.2%	4
		5	30.6%	15
		6	22.4%	11
		7	14.3%	7
19	The Placement Support Office has operating hours convenient to all its students.	1	12.2%	6
		2	12.2%	6
		3	8.2%	4
		4	22.4%	11
		5	28.6%	14
		6	10.2%	5

		7	6.1%	3
20	The Placement Support Office has employees who give you personal attention.	1	2.0%	1
		2	10.2%	5
		3	12.2%	6
		4	10.2%	5
		5	24.5%	12
		6	22.4%	11
		7	18.4%	9
21	The Placement Support Office has your best interests at heart.	1	2.0%	1
		2	8.2%	4
		3	12.2%	6
		4	14.3%	7
		5	18.4%	9
		6	30.6%	15
		7	14.3%	7
22	Employees of the Placement Support Office understand your specific needs.	1	4.1%	2
		2	8.2%	4
		3	12.2%	6
		4	28.6%	14
		5	22.4%	11
		6	14.3%	7
		7	10.2%	5

Appendix Three
Tangibles

- The Placement Support Office has modern-looking equipment.
- The Placement Support Office's physical facilities are visually appealing.
- The Placement Support Office's employees are neat-appearing.
- Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) are visually appealing at the Placement Support Office.

Reliability

- When the Placement Support Office promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.
- When you have a problem, the Placement Support Office shows a sincere interest in solving it.
- The Placement Support Office performs the service right the first time.
- The Placement Support Office provides its services at the time it promises to do so.
- The Placement Support Office insists on error-free records.

Responsiveness

- Employees of the Placement Support Office tell you exactly when services will be performed.
- Employees of the Placement Support Office give you prompt service.
- Employees of the Placement Support Office are always willing to help you.
- Employees of the Placement Support Office are never too busy to respond to your requests.

Assurance

- The behaviour of employees in the Placement Support Office instills confidence in students
- You feel safe in your transactions with the Placement Support Office.
- Employees of the Placement Support Office are consistently courteous with you.
- Employees of the Placement Support Office have the knowledge to answer your questions.

Empathy

- The Placement Support Office gives you individual attention.
- The Placement Support Office has operating hours convenient to all its students.
- The Placement Support Office has employees who give you personal attention.
- The Placement Support Office has your best interests at heart.
- Employees of the Placement Support Office understand your specific needs.

ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT STUDENTS THROUGH LEARNING INNOVATION

ANNE WHEELER

Abstract

The growing emphasis on employability skills development in Higher Education has encouraged academics to consider how such skills can be effectively embedded into the curriculum. In environmental management programmes graduate attributes are frequently developed through the laboratory and fieldwork that is implicit within the discipline. This paper considers how those skills can be further developed through learning innovation, and particularly through innovative assessment design. A number of examples are provided to illustrate how graduate skills can be enhanced.

Keywords: employability, graduate attributes, assessment, learning innovation

Introduction

The UK has continually emphasised the importance on Higher Education (HE) credentials (Tomlinson, 2008), however, the focus of HE has steadily shifted over the last 50 years. There has been an increasing expectation that the sector will contribute to the development of more complex skills and attributes, and not focus on subject skills alone (Knight & Yorke, 2003). As student numbers in HE have continued to increase, the demand by employers for students that have enhanced graduate attributes (in addition to their subject knowledge and competencies) has risen (Gedye and Chalkley, 2006). There has also been increasing competition for jobs in the graduate market with concomitant pressure on HE institutions to address the development of graduate attributes and employability skills. These skills can be divided into broadly three categories:

1. Higher level attributes, such as analytical, problem solving and decision making skills in complex and unpredictable contexts.
2. Key skills, such as IT, team-working, communication and information literacy skills.
3. Personal attributes, such as leadership, flexibility, creativity, and personal initiative and responsibility.

In the UK the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2001), in its Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Careers Education, Information and Guidance (CEIG), asked institutions to:

- Have a clear policy for CEIG, including the institution’s objectives.
- Consider the implementation of CEIG throughout the institutions’ curricula.
- Promote employability and associated skills development, including the concept of lifelong learning.
- Promote the value of work placements and work experience (after Gedye and Chalkey, 2006).

The guidelines for the integration of graduate skills were further referred to in the QAA (2008) Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

It has been argued that geography, earth and environmental science (GEES) departments have been at the forefront in endeavouring to incorporate innovative and flexible approaches to developing careers awareness and graduate skills into their curricula (Maguire & Guyer, 2004; Gedye & Chalkley, 2006; Planet Special Edition, 2009). This paper explores the opportunities to further embed skills development for employability and entrepreneurship within environmental management programmes through learning innovation, and particularly through varied assessment opportunities.

Assessment in Higher Education

Assessment in Higher Education (HE) has been a fundamental activity in order to assess the development and level of student learning. More recently practitioners in HE (e.g. Hughes and Boyle, 2005; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007), however, have argued that different types of assessment can have implications for the student learning experience.

Assessment of Learning

Traditional forms of assessment often in the form of exams are not necessarily integrated into the student's learning, often with the criteria unclear to the students. The exams are generally at the end of a course and rarely result in useful feedback to the students. In addition, when students do badly in exams lecturers and tutors tend to blame the students rather than lecturers reviewing their teaching. These exams are useful, however, for discriminating between different levels of learning, enabling the selection of students for further study, and providing evidence for quality assurance and maintenance of standards (Bloxham, 2010).

Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning is designed to promote more effective learning and is fully integrated with the teaching of the curricula. The assessment is aligned with the learning outcomes of the module or unit of study. The benefits of assessment for learning is that it can steer the students' approaches to learning, provide formative feedback for the students on their learning and progress, and also provide a diagnostic for the lecturer regarding barriers to learning, such as threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2006). The diagnostic element of this type of assessment can provide the tutor/lecturer useful information to inform changes in teaching strategies and evolution or modification of the curriculum (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

Assessment as Learning

This type of assessment is a cultural shift in thinking about the purpose of assessment in HE as it promotes the assessment as an integral part of the learning process. This is not a new activity in reality as most HE programmes of study incorporate an honours/Masters thesis or dissertation. The research element of the programme is a learning activity in itself and develops research, discursive and information literacy skills. This type of assessment is of benefit to students as it enables them to achieve an understanding of standards, they learn how to make judgements, are able to use criteria and they are able to tell when they really understand a concept, theory or idea (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

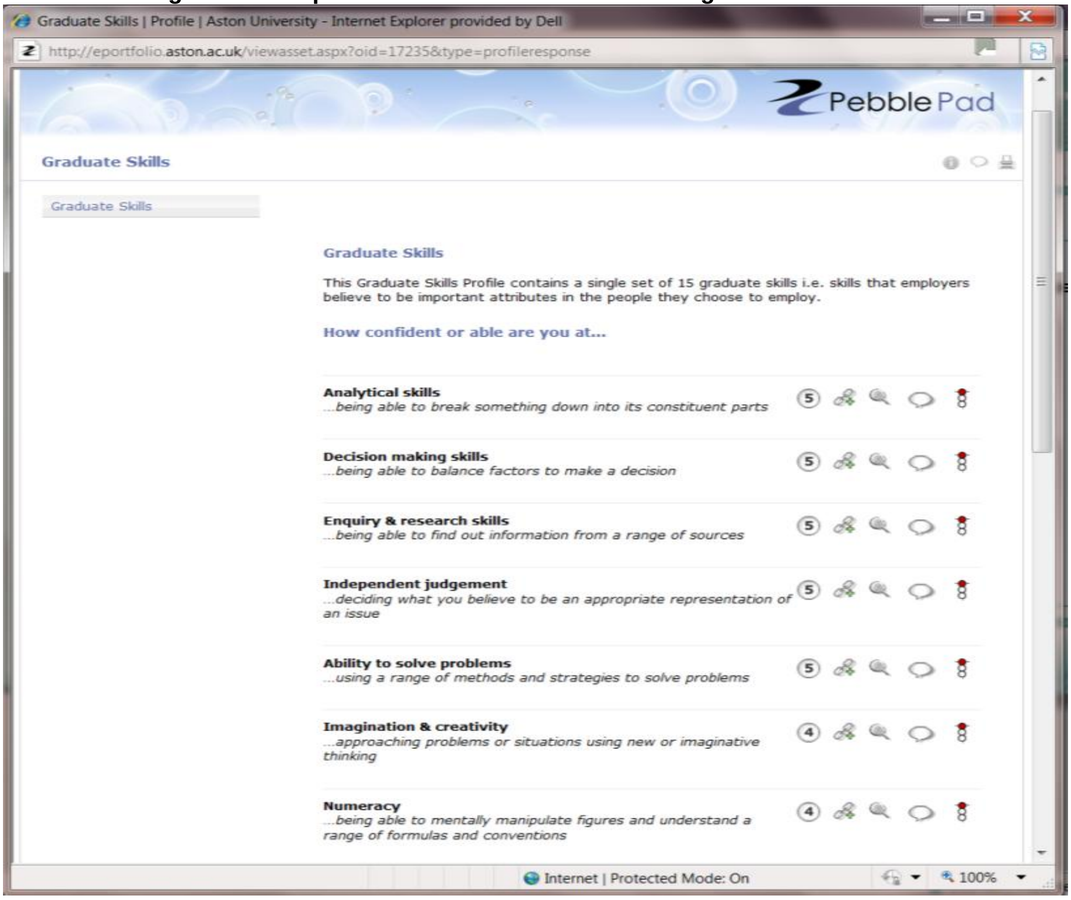
Assessment for employability

A number of learning innovations in the assessment of Environmental Management students have been initiated in various HE institutions in the UK that help to embed employability skills into the environmental curricula. Five examples of different assessment activities that could be used are discussed below.

Self-evaluation
Self-evaluation can promote student autonomy with regard their learning. Tutors, however, need to provide students with the opportunities to undertake this evaluation, either as part of formative or summative assessment. Students can be asked to write a reflective piece asking them to evaluate the quality of their work, their contribution to group work or their subject/graduate competencies.

An example of self-evaluation of graduate attributes in one UK institution includes an online survey within an e-portfolio (see ***Figure 1***) at the start, mid-point and final year of the students' degree programme. The self-evaluation allows students to monitor and consider their development, consider what the student needs to do to improve and to responsibility for their own learning. The profiling tool allows the student to rate themselves on a 1-6 Likert scale and attach evidence of their skills to the profile. The student can revisit and re-evaluate their attributes and attach new evidence throughout the course of their studies.

Figure1: Example of a student self-evaluation of graduate attributes.

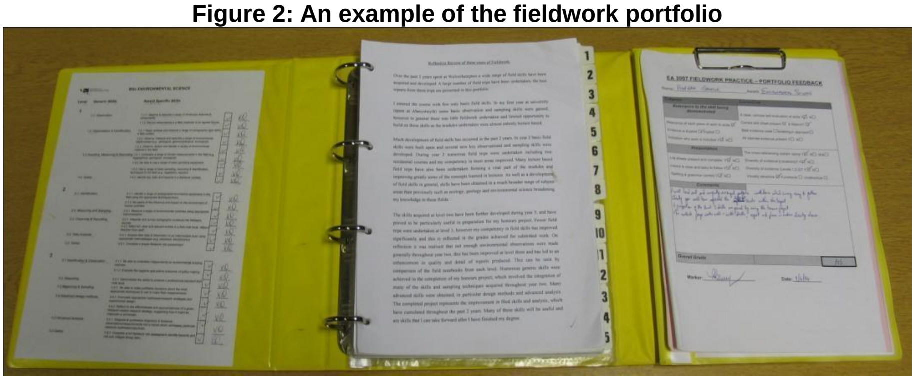


Graduate skills that the students develop include: self reflection, critical thinking, judgement backed with evidence, independent and autonomous learning and potentially lifelong learning skills.

Portfolios

Portfolios, either paper based or e-portfolios, provide students with the opportunity to evidence their learning journey over a period of time. At the University of Wolverhampton the portfolio in geography and environmental science and management covers 3 years of field work. The students select their best work that meets the criteria (on the left side of the folder in ***Figure 2***) and write a review of the development of field skills over 3 years (including their strengths and weaknesses).

Figure 2: An example of the fieldwork portfolio



Graduate skills that the students develop include: gathering and collation of appropriate evidence, synthesis of materials, written presentation skills and reflective skills.

Digital stories

Digital stories can be made from a series of photos or a short video with an attached audio report (2-5 minutes in duration). This type of assessment is much easier now with the increase in student use and ownership of mobile phones and digital cameras. The software (e.g. Audacity & Movie Maker) is free to download and easy to use. The format of digital stories allows reasonably quick assessment (so it is effective and efficient for the tutor). It also facilitates peer assessment and peer learning (students can watch each other's stories) and it can be put on a website for other students to watch.

Graduate skills that the students develop include: allowing students to display an understanding of a complex idea or practical skill in an individual and thoughtful manner, selection of appropriate information, enhancement of visual and oral presentation skills and the provision of an opportunity to display initiative and creativity.

E-postcards

E-postcards provide a quick and effective way for students to engage with their subject and for tutors to provide an innovative opportunity for students to further develop creative skills (France & Wakefield, in press). The e-postcard assessment is based on single PowerPoint slide, with the slide providing the picture (see ***Figure 3***) and note facility providing the 'reverse' of the postcard. The picture can be images or a diagram that provides key information visually, while the writing on the 'postcard' is usually in a style that communicates a key concept or explains a field site to an intelligent lay person, i.e. a non-expert in the field. This assessment can focus on aspects or concepts in environmental management or fieldwork, but can also be applied to other academic subjects.

Figure 3: Considering Climate Change through an E-postcard (4 examples: France & Wakefield, in press)

Graduate skills that the students develop include: careful consideration and synthesis of essential points, visual presentation, concise and accessible writing, and creativity.

Group work

Group work is traditionally used in most academic disciplines and regularly in environmental management and other GEES subjects. This type of assessment provides an ideal opportunity for a variety of complex employability and entrepreneurial skills to be developed, both through the activity itself and also through the associated assessment.

Tutors can give very responsible work or research to a student group and develop high level graduate skills. For example a mixed EU / Russian student group spent one month on the Black Sea coast. The group undertook research and field work in order to write a teaching manual for staff and students at Tyumen State University in the Russian Federation. They had to collect and collate appropriate information, present data, illustrations and diagrams in an appropriate manner with good interpretation and provide tutor notes for teaching. The subsequent manual was the final point of assessment. This group work could be considered assessment as learning at the highest level as students were linking research, teaching, learning and assessment.

Graduate skills that the students develop include: problem solving, team work, decision making, negotiation, research, data gathering & collation, management and creativity skills.

Conclusion

It is clear that the most effective way to develop employability skills for environmental management students is to embed their development into the curriculum. By innovative curriculum design these developmental opportunities can provide effective and efficient experiences for the students and staff. The assessment examples include e-learning initiatives, and Lynch *et al*. (2008) argue that such initiatives provide graduates with important information literacy skills. Innovative curriculum design provides interesting (and exciting?) opportunities for students and staff that can enhance creativity and flexibility. The examples provided can also be incorporated into work-based learning activities and assessment and can later provide short, sharp examples that students can offer at job interviews. Taken together as a whole throughout the students' programme of study these learning, teaching and assessment experiences can encourage lifelong learning that will stand them in good stead throughout their postgraduate careers.

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TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TO POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ASTON BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Introduction

Postgraduate students in Aston Business School (ABS) work extensively in pre-assigned, mixed nationality syndicate groups. Over 50 nationalities are represented each year, with UK students a small group of below 10%. Students are not permitted to change groups in order to work with their friends or with others from their home country, even though requests are frequently made. The model was set up with two key principles: 1) most of us are not able to choose which colleagues we would prefer to work with; 2) students who aspire to work internationally require intercultural awareness and teamwork competencies.

The challenges of working in international groups in educational and work contexts are well documented (Clyne 1994; Volet and Ang 1998; de Vita 2000; Holmes and Stubbe 2003). This is reflected in the ABS postgraduate cohort, where a typical pattern each year is that a number of groups and individual students experience difficulties in working and communicating with each other, with university staff and with their wider contacts outside the study context. On those occasions over the last 17 years when students have chosen or felt able to discuss this with the author they have reported varying degrees of dissatisfaction, bemusement and distress about the process and outcome of some of their interactions. Perceptions of impoliteness are a commonly cited issue (Brown & Levinson 1987; Holmes & Riddiford 2008).

Typically, however, by the end of the 9-month taught course, initial difficulties have not only been resolved, but students have formed good friendships with others from different countries. They have learned something about cultures which were previously unknown to them, and have gained confidence in their ability to interact with people from other parts of the world. It is not enough, however, to rely on this process taking place organically (Wright & Lander 2003; Lejk 2008). Following observation of these patterns over a number of years, the decision was taken in the Postgraduate Programme that something proactive should be done to help students get to this point at a much earlier stage of the course, to attempt to reduce some of the previous anxieties and to increase learning in this area.

Teaching intercultural communication as a formal module

A twenty week module was developed. Previously, intercultural communication had been introduced at sessions run during orientation, and subsequently addressed in an *ad hoc* fashion with groups of students who expressed an interest or asked for help.

It was decided that the issues which had been observed to cause difficulties in international student teams and syndicate groups would be addressed in a direct way. Why do people upset each other? Why do some people hardly speak in group meetings and others seem to dominate? How is respect envisaged and enacted? Why is what is normal for me not normal for you? Why did this person think I was being rude when I did not mean to be? In developing the module it was also decided to take a longitudinal approach so that students have the opportunity throughout the taught course to reflect on and revisit issues they find themselves dealing with.

Style of delivery

The module is delivered in seminar style. Theory, examples and case studies are presented in weekly notes on Blackboard™. These are used as the basis for discussions, during which students exchange their ideas, experiences and perceptions, initially in small groups of four or five, and then with the whole group. This pattern is usually repeated for three or four discussions during each seminar. By breaking into several small groups for initial discussions, many different aspects of the issues examined are brought back into the plenary sessions.

This method is used with the aim of depersonalising the context for students in order to encourage them to talk. The approach aims to provide students with reassurance that difficulties they have experienced, or aspects of their interactions which have puzzled or upset them, are not necessarily as a result of incompetence on their part, or a disrespectful approach on someone else's part. These experiences are more likely to be enactments of the socio-pragmatic complexity which exists in intercultural interactions, and which others have also experienced and analysed.

Module contents

The early weeks of the module focus on the functioning of the international syndicate groups to which students are assigned from the start. Later sessions move on to cultural variation in social, transactional and professional contexts.

1	Introduction to syndicate group work: the syndicate group "charter". What do students know about each others' cultures? Greeting styles.
2	Stages of group development: team roles and responsibilities. Establishing relationships, respect and trust.
3&4	Theories of culture: What is culture? How does it manifest itself? How does it vary? • task or relationship focus • attitudes to time • explicit or implicit information/communication • attitude to achievement, status and hierarchy • groups and individuals • certainty and uncertainty • attitudes to rules: universalism and particularism
5	Practical group observations: linguistic and behavioural communication styles. Based on the theories of culture covered in weeks 3 and 4, what do you observe in your teams/yourself?
6	Exploring cultural values and their impact on work group practices: group discussion of week 5 teamwork observations. *Term 1 assessment 1 (15%)*.
7	Positive and negative cultural stereotyping.
8	Language, culture and world views (Sapir/Whorf). Idioms and what they can reveal about culture.
9	Reflection on students' experiences: review of course/revision session
10	*Term 1 assessment 2 (30%)*: written coursework
11	Language and power. Working in a second language: how to manage this and help others do the same. Avoiding dominance and marginalisation in intercultural/multilingual teams.
12	Culture shock, culture conflict, culture anxiety. Handling language barriers.
13	Politeness and the concept of "face": socially appropriate behaviour and communication in different cultures. Implications for intercultural group work.
14	The importance and interpretation of non verbal communication: • Proxemic: personal space • Kinesic: gestures, postures • Chronemic: pacing of speech, use of silence • Paralinguistic: volume of speech, voice pitch, eye-contact, smiling, facial expression, use of laughter.
15	Practical group exercise: discussion in your work team about the team's work style and communication strategies. How has this changed since the course started? What accommodations have you made in order to demonstrate respect for all members and work together effectively?
16	*Term 2 assessment 1 (15%)*: Reflection and analysis of the week 15 exercise. What have you learned about your own and others' communication and work styles? What will you do differently as a group/as an individual to facilitate international team work?
17	Communication strategies for intercultural team work: • accommodating diverse norms • facilitating inclusive discussion • active listening skills • showing and voicing agreement/disagreement • giving opinions • managing frustration • avoiding conflict • maintaining face
18	Intercultural tools and competencies: observation, distantiation, participation, reflection, facilitation.
19	Reflection on students' experiences; review of course/revision session in class.
20	Assessment: cultural presentations in groups

Outcomes to date

The international composition of the cohort means that it is possible to deliver materials in a very different way than would be possible with a homogeneous group. By far the most powerful part of the sessions are the discussions which take place between students themselves, when they may both confirm and argue against the theory presented. Over the three years during which the module has run, the open nature of the discussions between students has been striking. It has been noted that, understandably, this openness tends to take a few weeks to develop. Once open discussions start to take place, they have tended to become the norm for the groups involved. It has been observed, however, that the most open discussions take place in smaller groups and rarely occur in groups of more than around 15 participants. This change in the nature of the discussions appears to coincide with the point at which students start to become more comfortable with self reflection, and to feel more able to ask others for interpretation and explanation of cultural patterns and beliefs. Once trust has been established in the group and discussions really get going, students often offer far more extreme examples of cultural practices from their own backgrounds than have been included in formally presented materials. The aim of the discussions is not to identify cultural templates but, rather, to reveal and explore diversity, and to give students a space where they can ask others for explanations of behavioural approaches and perceptions as well as to explore and explain their own.

Both lecturers are British, and although some classes include one or two British students, this is not always the case. An aspect of the way the module has developed, which was perhaps not initially envisaged, is that students often ask for explanations of aspects of British culture which they find strange or simply don't like! Part of the learning experience for all involved is to hear and respond to some, at times, surprising but illuminating perceptions of one's culture from others' point of view.

Next steps

The above module is a non-credit bearing option for postgraduate students in ABS. This year Intercultural Communication was also introduced as a component of a compulsory personal development module for a new MSc course. It is planned that in 2012/13 this will be extended across the MSc portfolio. The module is developed and presented jointly by Kathryn Ainsworth, MSc Director in ABS and Claire Richardson, Head of the Centre for English Language and Communication at Aston in LSS. Both have a background in language and area studies.

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Example used with MSc students

ASSESSED GROUP PRESENTATIONS IN A FINAL YEAR MODULE

MATTHEW OLCZAK & DAVID SAAL

Introduction

BS3362 Competition Policy and Economic Regulation is a year long module taken by approximately 80 final year students. This module presents the theory of competition and regulation policy and applies it to particular industrial policies adopted by governments internationally. For this module students are required to prepare a group presentation, submit an essay towards the end of the module and take a final examination. Until last year, however, the group presentation was not assessed. It was instead hoped that the preparation for the presentation would stimulate initial ideas and the students would undertake preliminary research for their individual essays. Over time it became apparent that student engagement with these group presentations was limited. Therefore, last year it was decided to make the group presentation count for 10% of the module assessment and make attendance at group presentations worth a further 5% of the mark. This article reports on how this group assessment is designed, in particular the detailed information provided to the students at the outset of the module. Then, we highlight the significant impact switching to assessed presentations has had on student engagement in the learning process.

Assessment Design

At the start of the module we allow the students to self-select into groups of five. Each group then chooses a case to study from a list we have prepared. Each groups' task is later in the module to run a 1 hour session (including time for discussion) on their allocated case-study. Beforehand the lectures introduce the relevant economic theories which students then apply to the case. Students are required to provide arguments for and against the verdict reached by the government/authority in the case and conclude on whether or not they agree with the decision. Discretion is given in how the students coordinate on their task however; teamwork between all group members must be demonstrated. In addition, in preparation for the presentation, each group is encouraged to meet with the lecturer to discuss their initial findings and the content of their presentation.

In order to manage expectations, when the cases are allocated at the start of the module, each group is provided with several supporting documents. First, a template outlining the expected content of the presentation is provided. Second, they are also provided with a list of key references for the case study. These include the official report of the case and often a book chapter providing an academic opinion on the decision. Finally, students are provided with a template of the form we will use to provide feedback. This outlines the categories under which the presentation will assessed, including marks for demonstrating teamwork and encouraging discussion. A single group mark is allocated for the presentation and detailed written feedback via the feedback form is provided within one week. Students are then required to develop the case-study into an individual essay (35% of final mark).

Evaluation

Our experience following this switch to assessed group presentations strongly supports the assertion by Gibbs (1999, p.41) that assessment is: 'the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners'. Whilst 10% seems a relatively low weighting, it has provided sufficient incentives to significantly increase student motivation and has resulted in high quality presentations. In addition, the non-presenting students also learn from the presentations and have been willing to engage in the resulting discussion and ask questions. Furthermore, in addition to the change in approach to the presentations, the students have also become much more engaged in the entire module. Crucially, the presentations also enable the students to early on receive detailed feedback in preparation for the written essay. We believe this has been an important factor contributing to the high standard of essays we received. There also appears to have been improved performance in the end of the module examination. Finally, feedback from students has been in favour of this form of assessment.

Two Potential Concerns

When deciding to make the group presentations assessed we had two main concerns. First, we were concerned that the increased importance of the presentations would result in an increase in accusations of free-riding behaviour by fellow group members. So far this has rarely been an issue. Arguably, both allowing the students to self-select into groups and the follow-on individual essay have helped to alleviate such problems. In addition, whilst a weighting of 10% for the presentation was sufficient to increase incentives, it should also be low enough to ensure this is not a major issue. Our second concern was that group co-ordination in preparing the presentation might spillover into the writing of the individual essays. Again, this problem has not arisen. This may demonstrate, as suggested by Williams (2005, p.10), that the risk of collusion and plagiarism can be reduced by designing an assessment that facilitates deeper learning. The group presentation allows initial knowledge spillovers between students but then motivates them to individually build on their research and ideas when preparing their essays.

Conclusion

Overall therefore, the relatively small change in switching to assessed group presentations has had a significant impact in increasing student engagement in this module. This example illustrates the benefits cumulative assessment and feedback can have provided there are adequate incentives for the students to engage in the task. In addition, our findings suggest that there may be benefits from the increased incentives that would arise from making all years of study contribute significantly to a student's degree classification.

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Example used with final year undergraduates taking
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OLD PROBLEM, NEW SOLUTION? ARE ANTI PLAGIARISM SOFTWARE PACKAGES THE ANSWER TO STUDENTS' ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT?

DR JOSIE KELLY

Introduction

Over the last ten years or so, academics and academic institutions have become increasingly alarmed by the marked increase in the number of reported incidents of plagiarism by students. Indeed, there is a suspicion that the reported cases only represent a tiny proportion of the actual figure of this form of academic malpractice (Perry, 2010, Evans, 2006). In essence, plagiarism is defined as 'where a student uses, without acknowledgement, the intellectual work of other people and presents it as her or his own' (Aston University REG/08/571(2) 2010 p 11). Plagiarism takes multiple forms and the most common manifestations include 'cutting and pasting' from the work of published work, such as textbooks or journal articles or the purchase of 'written to order' essays. Yet, whilst institutions have stated definitions and many academics will recognise plagiarism, there remains ambiguity between disciplines and institutional practices (Perry, 2010, Evans, 2006).

Why some students plagiarise is also complex; superficially students' explanations or justifications usually include factors such as ignorance (uncertainty about referencing), indolence (didn't think it mattered, ran out of time), and collusion with others (my friend told me how to do the assignment or the other person stole my work) (Evans, 2006). Other cultural and social factors cannot be ignored (Introna, *et.al.,* 2003). Whilst these practices are not new, what is new however, is that in the contemporary UK system of mass higher education there seems to be considerable opportunities for students who want to cheat by plagiarising the work of others. Within academic communities there is a sense that where previously there were isolated incidences of plagiarism, without effective deterrents, the practice is fast becoming endemic.

Plagiarism presents a risk to institutional reputation and universities are increasingly turning to use regularly electronic means of detecting plagiarism with packages such as Turnitin (Dahl, 2007). These systems check students work for originality by comparing their assignment to the work of other students in his/her own institution and elsewhere including large academic proprietary databases the company have licences to access. There are concerns, however, that the algorithms used by Turnitin occasionally fail to detect more sophisticated forms of plagiarism. Others claim that routine use by universities of packages such as Turnitin implies presumption of guilt (Evans, 2006). Despite these criticisms, anti-plagiarism packages are believed to be the most effective means currently available to detect cheating and to maintain the integrity of the marking and assessment of students work and the awards conferred by universities.

This paper briefly discusses my own experiences and reflects upon the use of Turnitin in a very large class and the implications it has for my future practice. The use of devises, such as Turnitin, may superficially help to address plagiarism. To be effective electronic systems, however, require to be located within an institutional strategy that also engages preventative measures in the first instance and to balance academic discretion with the requirement that all students are treated fairly.

Background

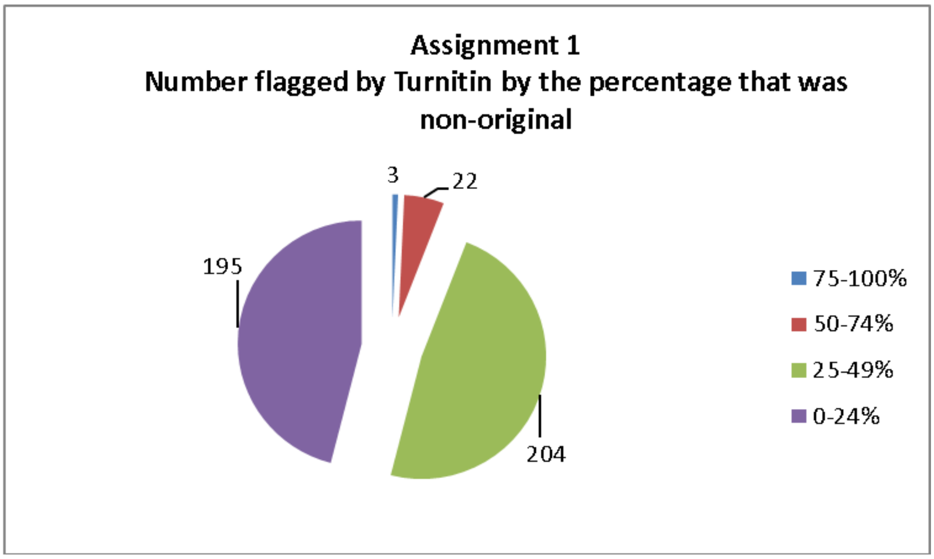
In 2010 Aston Business School undergraduate office began the gradual roll out of Turnitin as a mechanism to check the authenticity of students' course work. During the 2010/11 academic year all first year students are required to submit their course work in the normal manner and through the Turnitin portal. This requirement will be continued to be rolled out in future years.

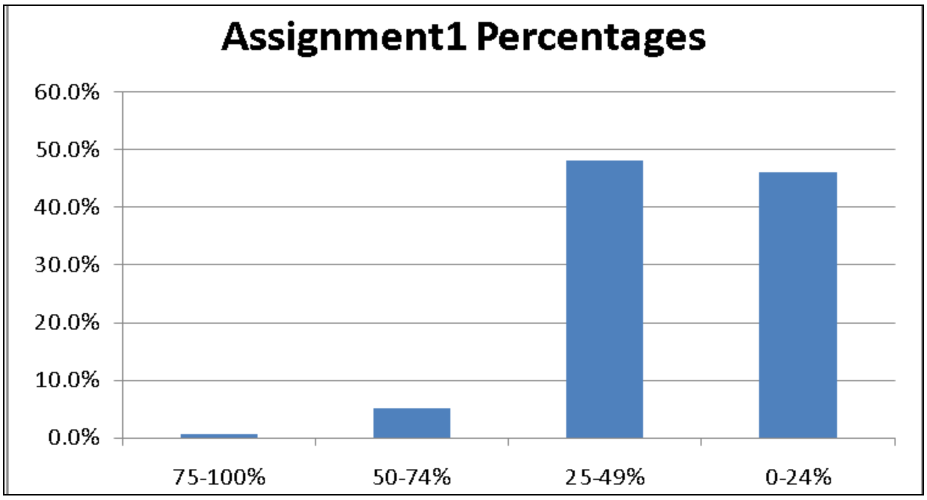
Foundations of Management is a first year module that runs in the first semester and is common to all single honour (except Law) UK and EU undergraduate students (non EU overseas students take International Foundations of Management which follows a broadly similar curriculum and, the first assignment is the same in both modules). The course is broadly in two parts; the first deals with academic skills, such as using the library and academic writing, including citation practice and how to avoid plagiarism, working in groups and intercultural awareness. The second part of the module looks at management and business issues in an industrial sector, from a number of different perspectives – this year's case study material was the food industry.

Assessment is by two pieces of coursework; the first assignment invited students to write a 1000 word review on a journal article from a selected list on the food industry. The second was a group assignment, which required students to complete a four slide power point presentation and a 500 word commentary on contemporary issues in the food industry.

Turnitin Returns on the First Assignment

Students were required to submit their assignments to the undergraduate office and also electronically through the Turnitin portal on Blackboard™. Assignments submitted to Turnitin were matched against the system's data bases and those academic repositories it holds licences to determine originality. Table 1 shows the distribution of assignments and the percentage of non originality as reported by Turnitin.





Most noticeably was the high number of submitted assignments that were found to have contained 25% or more non originality elements. At the highest level of unoriginality, between 50-100% there were 25 assignments, this represented 6 % of the total submitted.

These findings for non-originality from Turnitin were not straightforward, however. Turnitin reports require interpretation. In this case, the nature of the assignment generated multiple false positives. The title of the assignment, the tutor's name and the title of the paper under review were highlighted as unoriginal. Quotes from the text were also identified as being unoriginal, even when in speech marks and correctly referenced. Furthermore, there were also close matches assignments from this module and those who took IFOM who reviewed the same articles. These findings were not surprising, but a consequence of a very large group of students (568 students are registered for the two modules) working on an assignment that required them to review a paper from a selection of nine articles.

Guidance from the University regulations cautions that in the case of first year students such breaches ought to be treated as poor technique rather than plagiarism, The guidelines state;

> A member of staff must exercise judgement when the apparent offence is limited in extent, or may arise out of ignorance of the academic culture within UK HE institutions (e.g. school leavers submitting their first coursework, international MSc students). In such cases it will normally be most appropriate to take the opportunity of normal assessment procedures to penalise what amounts to poor technique and to offer formative feedback to the student to prevent further error. It is important that such feedback must attribute the mark penalty for this sort of error to poor technique rather than to plagiarism (which is by definition a disciplinary matter).

Reg/07/524 **Quality and Standards Committee**

Accordingly, those students whose assignments were in the top category (75-100% non originality) were invited by email to meet with the module leader to discuss their assignment. They were not forewarned that their assignment was scored by Turnitin as showing high levels of non-originality. The meetings with the student followed similar pattern; they were invited to discuss how they prepared their assignment, their knowledge and understanding of the plagiarism regulations and why they thought it was important to cite their sources correctly. They were also asked about collusion with other students.

The first significant finding from these conversations was that several of this particular group of students were unsure of what was expected of them in the assignment. Although they were provided with extensive information on the assignment, including a briefing, an assignment checklist and several emails and postings on Blackboard™, several students complained that they were unsure about how to review an academic paper and how they should complete it. When marking the assignments, it was apparent that many students were unsure how to paraphrase, they had poor comprehension skills and frequently misused quotations from the document under review.

Despite uncertainty about the task, all the students interviewed stated that they were aware of the importance of referencing and the citation of their sources, although most admitted that they were unsure of how they ought to reference correctly.

When presented with their assignment marked up by Turnitin, their explanations were similar – error and oversight, ignorance. Only one student denied the evidence that sections of her assignment were not her own work but taken from elsewhere; when a section of her assignment was put into Google search engine and brought up the article from whence it was taken she acknowledged her error and she argued that she did not realise what she had done was wrong. Effectively these meetings became personal tutorials on the student's academic work, the challenges of higher education and provided students with detailed advice to referencing and how they could improve their work more generally. Perversely, then, offenders had detailed personal tutorials, the same opportunity was denied to those students who had tried hard to follow the University guidelines.

When asked, the students were surprised and were seemingly unaware that the University could independently verify the originality of their assignments. It was noticeable. however, that about a third of the students who were asked to meet with the module leader were initially reluctant to do so and a further reminder email was sent to them. In a very small minority of cases (4) a further reminder was sent. This suggests that whilst ignorance was claimed, their reluctance to meet with the module leader could be interpreted as an indication that they were aware that their assignments were problematic in some way.

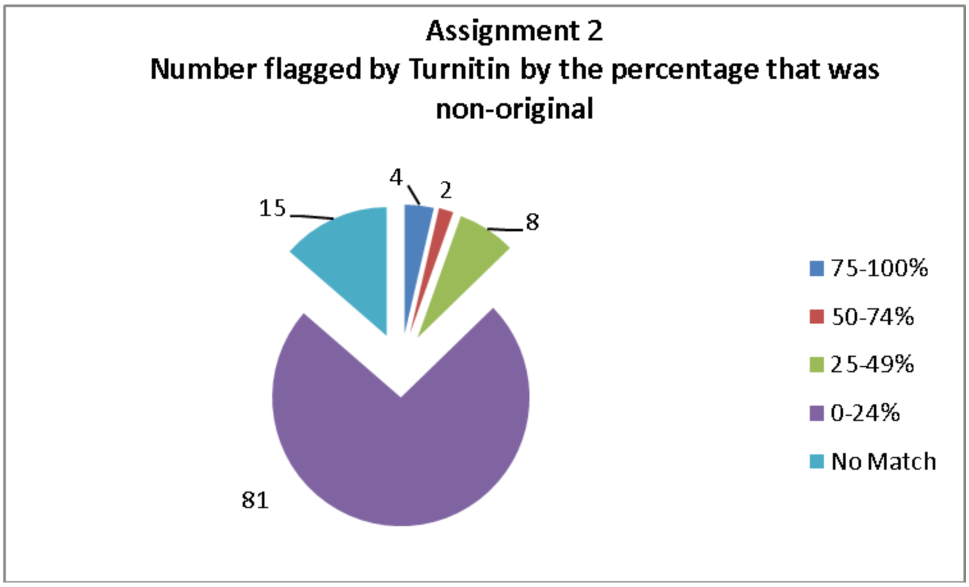
In all these cases, the students were cautioned verbally on the implications of poor academic technique, reminded to consult the University handouts and guidance notes previously sent to them. In their personal feedback they were also reminded of the necessity to ensure that for future assignments their referencing was accurate. Following University guidelines the mark for the assignment was modified to take account of their inadequate poor technique.

Second Assignment

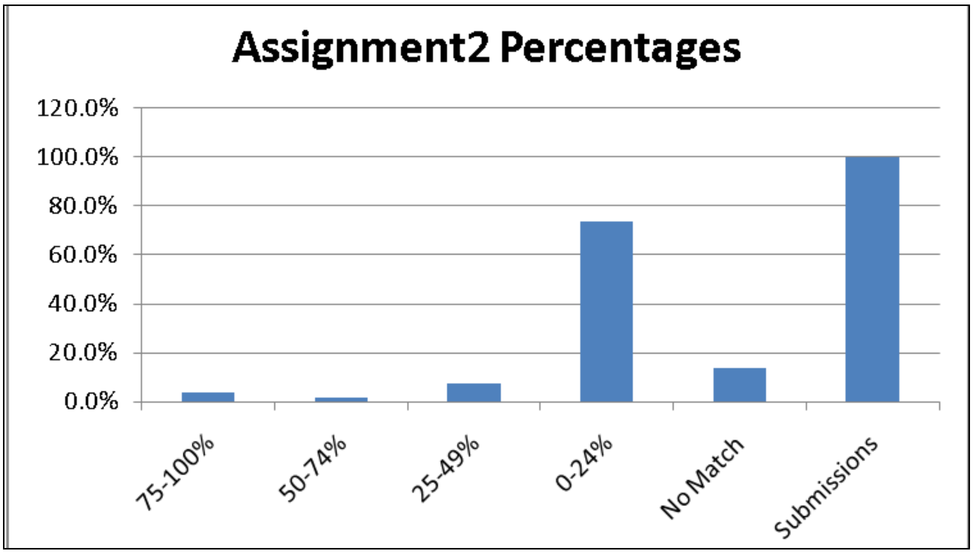
The second assignment was quite different to the first and required students, in assigned groups, to prepare a four slide power point presentation and write a 500 word commentary to explain the information on the slides in more detail and the reasons for their choice of topic. Similar to the first assignment, the students were provided with some choice of topic.

As part of the preparation for the second assignment, students were provided with a comprehensive handout on common errors found in the first assignment, including two paragraphs on the importance of correct citations. Similarly to the first assignment the students were alerted to the dangers of plagiarism and that they may well be in breach of University regulations if the work was found to be non original.

For the second assignment only the 500 word commentary was submitted to Turnitin. Analysis reported that there was broadly the same percentage as in the first assignment that displayed non originality; although those at the bottom end of the scale 73 % of assignments submitted were recorded in the lowest category of between 0-25% non originality. In other words, most students work was found not to be derivative of the sources they referred to or the work of other students.



In percentage terms a similar number of the second assignments were identified as non original and these were treated in accordance with the University guidelines. Because of the Christmas vacation and the inter semester period, there were considerable difficulties in arranging to meet those groups where the assignment was problematic. Because the written commentary represented only 40% of the marks for the assignment, adjustments for poor techniques were less significant than in the first assignment. Nevertheless, the assignment grades were adjusted to take account of poor academic technique and mentioned in the feedback.



Conclusions

Probably in common with other colleagues, throughout my academic career I have spent time questioning the originality of some of the work that I am required to assess. And I have too experienced the frustration of time spent checking multiple print sources in order to provide evidence of suspected cases of plagiarism. Undeniably, a computer package that does this in a fraction of the time seems almost too good to be true! Indeed, with the increased availability of material available for students to purchase and to pass off as their own, and the risk this presents to the quality of our awards, to question the use of anti plagiarism packages may seem perverse.

Following my experience of Turnitin as module leader and an external examiner, I suggest there are several issues that our academic community ought to consider. These can be broadly understood as proactive and reactive strategies toward plagiarism and academic malpractice. A further frame for the discussion of these matters is to look at actions from the perspective of the student, lecturer (including module leaders and others in teaching and assessment) and the institution (whether at the point of the academic group, School or institution). In practice, there is overlap between these approaches

1. Turnitin invest considerably in support material and marketing of the product not only as an anti plagiarism tool but also a very effective mechanism for helping students to develop their knowledge and understanding of how to reference correctly and accurately. A major strength of Turnitin, however, is its capacity to identify where there are cases of non originality. Nevertheless with large classes with limited choices of assignments, it is almost inevitable that matches will be found that are false positives that will require interpretation and further investigation to check to whether there has been collision between students. This will cause some students unnecessary anxiety and create more requests for clarification and reassurance from others.

2. In some institutions, students are invited to submit their assignments to Turnitin for peer review and to check that their work is not plagiarised. Without expert guidance to help students to interpret the findings from Turnitin, there is a risk that that some students will be caused unnecessary anxiety. In other words there are resources implications for those involved in students support and for lecturers. It is also possible that some students will use this mechanism as a means of helping them 'beat the system'.

3. At present module leaders and markers own the problem of plagiarism for it is they who first identify cases of academic malpractice. With Turnitin, arguably it is more appropriate that the problem becomes part of the administration of coursework submissions and, at least in the first instance they should alert the module leader that there is a potential problem. There remains, however, particularly for larger classes considerable resource issues even when small percentages of students' assignments are identified as problematic.

Reflections on my own practice

There is evidence that preventative strategies can reduce the number of plagiarism cases (Evans. 2006, Perry, 2010). Rather than dealing with plagiarism, however, it is more sensible to look at how assignments can be constructed to design out or at least to reduce the opportunity for plagiarism. For several introductory and intermediary courses this will no doubt create considerable challenges, because of the necessity of dealing with initial and first principles concepts and theories.

In the case of Foundations of Management, there are several proactive and educational actions that are possible to include in the teaching programme.

- Include material and examples from Turnitin in lectures on academic skills
- Provide more back ground material to the Learning Development Centre and to publicise their services more widely to students
- In additional to posting material on Blackboard™ use the discussion board to help students understand how we define plagiarism and how students can improve their academic work by avoiding plagiarism.
- Whilst retaining the same first assignment, provide different articles for students to review.
- For the second assignment, provide different case studies for the students to investigate.

Lastly, although Turnitin provides lecturers with the means to easily verify the authenticity of students' work, it does require some adaptation to how we teach our subjects and to be more proactive to ensure students understand what is required of them. A second consideration is that even in the case of introductory classes where it may be difficult to reconfigure assignments each year, designing out opportunities for plagiarism to occur should become a bench mark of good academic practice.

More generally, I suspect that there will always be some students who believe that the risk of detection of plagiarism in their work is outweighed by the rewards. The job of academics is to reduce the opportunities and have a robust system in place to ensure detection. Nevertheless, there is also a case for further research on whether the sum of structural changes to the UK system of higher education, including the importance of university education to future employment prospects; the sense of anonymity that students experience in a system of mass higher education more generally and the time pressures that many students face because of part time employment, has provided the conditions where students plagiarise.

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Example used with undergraduate students
on the Foundations of Management Module

WHY SOCIAL MOBILITY MATTERS: E-MENTORING IN LAW, A STRATEGIC PLAN

ODETTE HUTCHINSON

Introduction

In recent years our economy has come to rely increasing on service-based and professional employment. In the future, the UK's economic advantage may increasingly lie in knowledge-based services, the very sectors where professionals are concentrated. The final report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions concluded in 2009 that:

"The country's future prosperity and growth - its business and exports - may in the future be underpinned by the professions".
Unleasing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, July 2009, p16.

A central component therefore, of any public policy agenda concerned with the enhancement of social mobility - is how best to widen access to the professions.

Undoubtedly, it is for each individual to determine how to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves in life. Choices concerning individual career paths inevitably involve trade-offs, which aspiring students will in turn navigate in ways that suit their own personal circumstances. Significantly however, the presentation of quality opportunities lies frequently beyond the individual's control (*Unleasing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009)*

Gaining admission to university to study law is extremely competitive. For students from a non-privileged background it can be difficult to gain the support, knowledge and insight necessary to make a successful application to read law. This contribution to the Good Practice Guide charts the strategic planning and launch of an e-mentoring scheme, which aims to respond to the Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, and its bitterly severe condemnation of the increasingly elitist 'closed shop' mentality which pervades admission to the legal profession.

The Aston Law e-mentoring scheme aims to support individuals from non-privileged backgrounds in navigating a career in law; whilst at the same time allowing our own law students to augment leadership skills which will further enhance their employability. This project envisages the provision of a lasting human contact, someone that the mentees can turn to for advice along the way. As the mentees career path develops so too will the mentors, providing current advice and long term support. The project has a broader and more ambitious 'citizenship and community' learning objective which seeks to position mentoring firmly within teaching, learning and assessment

The objective of this contribution to the Good Practice Guide is to illustrate the usefulness of a logical strategic planning process to the most modest educational leadership and management activities.

The starting position for this strategic planning process has been the development and articulation of a vision and mission for the project. Devised in consultation with the mentors and the Aston Law Staff. It can be articulated as follows:

Vision
'To enthuse, inspire and support students from a wide diversity of backgrounds to aspire to and succeed at career in law.'

Mission/Purpose
'To erode gender, cultural and knowledge barriers to participation though developing an e-mentoring scheme which develops mentors and mentees'.

Success Criteria

The first part of this contribution outlines the agreed success criteria for the project. These have been devised once again in consultation with the mentors and academic staff at Aston Law. A key aspect of this strategic plan has been to encourage, and enhance vesting in the project by the stakeholders. The success criteria are the criteria by which the project will be evaluated and assessed at strategic points in the project's lifetime.

Objective	Description	Success Criteria
1	To recruit Aston Law e-mentors who are committed to its vision and mission.	a) to recruit a minimum of 5 e-mentors from the LL.B. first year. b) recruits should be representative re the WP (Widening Participation) agenda
2	To recruit a manageable and sufficient number of e-mentees who meet the qualifying criteria for the scheme.	a) to advertise the scheme to target schools/colleges which objectively meet the WP agenda. b) to recruit a minimum of 20- maximum of 30 mentees for the project.
3	To develop in partnership with its stakeholders a vision and mission for the project.	a) to develop a vision and mission for the project. b) to ensure that this development takes place in partnership and consultation with the team and other stakeholders.
4	To be in full compliance at all times with the universities child protection policy.	a) to ensure all e-mentors and staff have completed full CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) disclosure. b) to ensure that forums are fully moderated and compliant with ACPP (Aston Child Protection Policy and Procedure. c) To disseminate and present the policy to all e-mentors.
5	To train the e-mentors in using the BrightJournals™ software.	a) all mentors to receive an induction to the programme/ software. b) ensure that e-mentors are aware of the technical support available. c) to produce a training pack/induction pack for future e-mentor intakes.
6	To develop a marketing strategy in line with the objectives of the project	a) branding of Aston Law materials and AU materials with AimHigher and BrightJournals logos b) AU marketing representative on the team c) Development of webpages and linked websites
7	Obtain consents for a longitudinal study into the effectiveness of such projects.	a) to consult with Ethical Approval Board regarding consent forms & Data protection. b) To disseminate information about the nature and purpose of the collection of information and the consent.
8	To investigate sustainable funding, sponsorship/partnership.	a) collate information of potential funding streams and sponsorship to ensure sustainability
9	To devise and deliver activities in partnership with mentors and mentees which enthuse and inspire their goal to study/practice law.	a) to devise engaging activities which enthuse potential students of law b) to devise activities in partnership with the mentors c) to collate information on the impact of such activities

Plan

There is an important caveat with regard to the plan that follows, and what might appear to be sparsity in terms of evidential criterion. This is a conscious and deliberate omission to enable review and reflection of the impact, and achievement of goals which are critical to the success of this project. The focus of the justification section in this plan will therefore be to prioritise those success criterion that are fundamental to the project. Allowing 'what matters' to be evaluated within the confines of the time and resources available. The preference being consideration and reflection on formative evidence, that which can be used to shape, modify and enhance the project.

Success Criteria	Evidence	Justification	Timeframe	Completed
1		a)	01/11	✔ ✔
2		a)	12/10	✔ ✔
3a **3b**	Minutes of meeting Self reporting evidence	Factual quantitative evidence that activities have been produced. Process orientated, qualitative evidence needs to be obtained from the mentors to determine the extent to which they have worked in partnership to devise the vision and mission for the project. This can be obtained through a short questionnaire.	02/11	✔
4	CRB Enhanced Disclosure - confirmation Moderators reports Documents	Two mentors partially completed disclosure - OH to chase.	02/11 05/11	✔
5		a)	02/11	✔ ✔ ✔
6			03/11	a)
7a **7b**	Meeting notes & associated documentation Research methodology	In keeping with institutional agendas the foundations for a longitudinal study into the effectiveness and efficiency of this initiative will be undertaken at this stage of the leadership project . It is imperative to note the limitations of the term effective (Scott, 1997). Internal processes which impact on effectiveness of the project need to be considered in terms of: economy, efficiency and effectiveness as performance measures.	05/11	
8		a)	05/11	a)
9a **9b** **9c**	Documentation in relation to determined activities - curriculum; teaching plans & objectives Self reporting, qualitative (MENTORS) - the extent to which the mentors devised and delivered activities in partnership Self reporting (MENTEES)	Quantitative Criterion 9c is also qualitative. Short interviews recorded on FLIP cameras- Did activities enthuse and inspire mentees to study law? This should feed into the longitudinal study which will chart participants' success obtaining a place to study law and entrance into the profession (quantitative). The study should also consider the extent to which the participants feel the experience was beneficial (qualitative) (or not!) This methodology needs to be reviewed and developed with CLIPP.	05/11 Review and reflection of data	

Contextual factors: Food for Thought

This section of this strategic plan introduces issues related to the contexts within which Aston University (AU) and this project will operate. Educational institutions are far from homogeneous entities, they exhibit their own internal cultures, objectives, structures and processes. External contexts by contrast reflect global, national and local issues in relation to political, economic and social forces that impact on the HE sector. In terms of this project in particular it includes the increasingly competitive and consumerist environment in which AU finds itself. These contextual factors are multifaceted and fluid, their increasingly permeable boundaries can make definitive categorization of external and internal contexts challenging (Anderson *et al* 2003). In a time of unprecedented change in the Higher Education (HE) sector it is also necessary to consider the 'temporal context', that is the context in which AU might find itself within, in the very near future.

Potential Constraint: Images of Higher Education

This potential constraint is particularly pertinent when considering the work of Leithwood *et al 1999,* who offer three images of the future of educational leadership. The first of which is the notion of the educational organization as central to the community - as an organization which demonstrates 'integrative vales' and 'motivating values'. The second image promulgated by Leithwood *et al* is the conceptualization of an educational organization as a 'high reliability organization' subject to audits, inspections, and arguably evidence based practice.

The difficulties of assessment with reference to the success of this project become more pronounced when one considers that assessment terminology is inherently value laden and subject to interpretation. Bottery, 2000 highlights the need for leaders and managers to be clear about the perspective that they are using to view or assess a situation; different stakeholders - assess the efficacy or desirability of any given approach or outcome differently. This e-mentoring project is likely to require active and extensive boundary management to maintain the balance between efficacy in terms of resource allocation and disproportionate resource depletion in order to achieve a 'greater good' in line with the vision and mission of the project.

Potential Constraint: Issues of Motivation and Reward

The second potential challenge for this project lies in the nature and intensity of our own undergraduate programme. This project utilizes our own undergraduate students as mentors for aspirational students in Further Education (FE). The LL.B. Law with Management students are undertaking one of the most challenging qualifying law degrees in the country. Their time and commitment is at a premium; it is therefore crucial to embed some sort of award or academic credit for our mentors, this will act as a motivator and reward, which will help sustain commitment to the project. Linking mentoring with some sort of award or credit may also encourage mentors to reflect on their mentoring, identifying and articulating what they have developed and gained from the experience, thereby enhancing their employability.

Potential Constraint: De-institutionalizing trends

There is a pervasive belief that our society must become a 'learning society' this has led to burgeoning academic literature on the need for education to develop a more person-centered approach. This necessarily involves the development of skills such as collaborative working (Dalin and Rust, 1996) and a key skill, problem solving (Bentley, 1998). To respond to the reality of modern work modes, it is argued that there is a need for greater dispersed leadership within organizations to allow individuals the opportunity to problem solve within agreed criteria. If AU's students are to be able to respond to this changing and dynamic environment they need to experience problem solving and leadership activities throughout their education. Importantly they need to clearly see it modeled in their academic achievements. It is hoped that this e-mentoring scheme will go some way to addressing this contextual expectation. Indeed it might be cautiously submitted, that equipping students with these skills and attributes could form part of the criteria by which an AU is judged to be an organization of 'high reliability' in much the same way as we are judged by other outputs today.

Potential Constraint: Funding and Sustainability
The integrity of this e-mentoring project will be harmed if insufficient resources are allocated to the management of the project. There is a need to link this project with AU's core strategy for WP in order to achieve sustainability. Sustainability may require multiple income/funding streams which may be more easy to access because of the duplicitous nature of this project. The project has strong linkages to AU's employability agenda and its commitment to work-based learning. It is submitted that in a climate of increasingly high student expectations, employability discourse will penetrate the organizational boundary creating a generative/replicative dimension which is highly conducive to organizational change and sustainability (Dimmock and Walker, 2000).

Strategic Leadership and Management

The second stage of our launch strategy has been an exploration of a number of aspects in relation to strategic development, leadership and management. The strategic development model proposed by Johnson and Scholes, 2002 has been helpful in identifying the complexity of the developmental process for this project and its interconnectedness with wider institutional strategies and policies. This three stage process involves: understanding the strategic position; making strategic choices and finally putting the strategy into action. The model highlights the reality that although I plan to adopt a leadership role in this activity; my role and ability to shape institutional strategy is limited! It is hoped that the dovetailing /'piggybacking' this project with wider school and institutional strategic aims will mitigate this limitation and help augment a 'united commitment to the aims of the project', by creating a 'strong sense of shared ownership and involvement' (MacGilchrist et al., 1997, p236).

In this context it has been important to note that a number of existing AU institutional strategies which impact on the e-mentoring project, have not always followed a logical planning process and trajectory. As such, resource constraints for the WP agenda and shifting contexts have created gaps and overlaps which at times give the impression of 'piecemeal and insufficient strategic focus' (Weindling, 1997), this has presented challenges for the planning and launch of this project. In particular with reference to how this, and other outreach projects can feed into our admissions policy which demands exceptional academic qualifications form the very cohort of students likely to face barriers to attainment.

Rational approaches to organizational strategy are both necessary and important, but they fall short of sufficient. In order to make sense of the complexities of organizational life here at AU and the impact of the rapidly changing contextual factors, this project has needed to draw on alternative perspectives which acknowledge the bounded rationality of organizational decision making. As Mintzberg points out 'smart strategists appreciate that they cannot be smart enough to think through everything in advance' (Mintzberg, 1987). A core feature of our strategic plan has been therefore to allow for evolutionary organic development as contexts and circumstances change (Fullan, 2001).

This strategic plan for organizational improvement is necessarily complex and long-term. Any planned organizational change involve alterations to the way that we do things, which-necessarily involves instability, uncertainty and friction. In short only by putting this project into action, and working through the challenges as they occur will crystallization of the aims and objectives of the e-mentoring project take root. It is reassuring to know that change and processes outcomes can be legitimately ambiguous and unpredictable, this insight has allowed the teams resources and efforts to be focused on coping strategies (Louis and Miles, 1992).

Acknowledging the importance of my role in fostering a positive culture with reference to this project, logically lead to a consideration of the challenges faced in sustaining positive change. It is likely that there will likely be a number of significant tensions for the leadership and management of this project, in terms of balancing competing external and internal accountabilities. It seems reasonably clear that the relative success of this project may rely on the ability of the e-mentoring leadership team to cultivate a culture of self-evaluation linked to ongoing organizational improvement and broader institutional strategy objectives.

This project must therefore be defined and measured both in terms of its goals and outcomes and importantly its effectiveness in terms of process - the quality of the educational and mentoring experience that it provides for our own students and the mentees. Gray, offers a 3 stage questioning process which encompasses outcomes and goals (Gray, 1993). As applied to this project they may be:

1. Are the mentees achieving above average success in applying to study law/Are the mentors developing above average transferable employability skills?
2. Are the mentees satisfied with the mentoring experience/ Are the mentors satisfied with the quality of the mentoring experience?
3. Have the mentors and mentees formed a vital relationship with a mentor and or the subject/profession?

As sustainability and funding have been identified in the previous section as potential constraints, the effectiveness of this project and the leadership of it, might be measured in terms of the projects ability to evolve and adapt to changing contexts and environments (Goldring, 1997). As sustainability requires resources and funding it is important that the leadership team are able to mobilize and stream resources.

Reflection on our strategic plan has been useful in terms of identifying gaps or lost opportunities for the dissemination of findings and approaches. Whilst the leadership team feel it is important not to overstate the usefulness of findings and to acknowledge the cultural limitations to a blueprint dissemination; discussions throughout the the development process pointed to the innovative nature of this project and its usefulness to other subunits, schools and institutions. As such a key feature of our strategic planning process has been the integration of research and dissemination into the projects developmental strategy.

Final Thoughts

This contribution is by no means a comprehensive strategy, plan and reflection. It has been offered as an exemplar of the usefulness of the strategic planning process in an educational improvement and leadership context. The process, feedback from stakeholders, and the articulation of our project's aims and objectives has been invaluable in contextualizing and internalizing the benefits of knowledge and understanding in the field of educational leadership and management.

Fundamentally, it is one response by staff and students at Aston Law to the important role the professions play in economic and civic life, and one potential medium by which Aston University can play a key role in unlocking social mobility in the UK.

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APPENDIX 1: HELM SEMINAR SERIES 2010/2011

HELM Seminar Series 2010/11

SW1109, 12:30pm - 2pm
(sandwich lunch served at 12:30, seminar starts shortly before 1pm)

28 October 2010

Dr Roy Smith (Aston University)
Managing the Student Experience for Cross-disciplinary Undergraduates

Cross-disciplinary programmes offer course managers, deliverers and students particular challenges. These have been manifested and solved in different ways in different UK HE Institutions. This seminar explores some of these alternatives and relates them to the student experience

2 December 2010

Odette Hutchinson (Aston Business School)
Using Motivational Techniques to Give and Receive Student Feedback

27 January 2011

Dr Colin Beard (Sheffield Hallam University)
Space for Learning – Corporate and Educational Contexts

and...

10 March 2011

Second Learning and Teaching Symposium

9.30am – 4.00pm

APPENDIX 2: HIGHER EDUCATION JOURNALS

Education Journal Rankings

Journal Title	Impact Factor	Aston Ranking
Review of Educational Research	3.361	4*
Academy of Management Learning and Education	2.889	4*
Journal of Learning Sciences	2.433	4*
Health Education Research	2.31	4*
Computers and Education	2.19	4*
Sociology of Education	1.594	3/4*
Journal of Higher Education	1.25	3*
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	1.133	**3***
British Journal of Educational Technology	1.041	3*
British Journal of Educational Studies	0.977	3*
Studies in Higher Education	0.938	3*
Journal of Educational Policy	0.933	3*
Research in Higher Education	0.871	3*
British Educational Research Journal	0.791	3*
Journal of Educational Research	0.667	3*
Higher Education	0.6	3*
Harvard Educational Review	0.619	2/3*
Economics of Educational Review	0.804	2*
Educational Research	0.75	2*
Comparative Education	0.741	2*
Review of Higher Education	0.613	2*
British Journal of Sociology of Education	0.573	2*
Journal of Economic Education	0.237	2*
Educational Studies	0.516	1*
Education and Urban Society	0.5	1*
Educational Administration Quarterly	0.477	1*
Educational Review	0.473	1*
Educational Policy	0.4	1*
Adult Education Quarterly	0.387	1*
Innovations in Education and Teaching	0.25	1*

Good Practice Guide in
Learning and Teaching
Volume 8

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