



Work and professional development: embedding an international dimension in a social policy curriculum.

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Course details

Course title - Applied Social Sciences

Level - Undergraduate

Year - 2

Module title - Work & Professional Development

Discipline/Subject areas - Social Policy

Context

Funded Project

This case study is one of four outputs created as the result of a funded project entitled 'thinking, learning and 'doing' international work experience'.

Case study 1 describes how a team of colleagues at Sheffield Hall University added an international stream to a core level 2 degree module.

Case studies 2 – 4 review some of the teaching and learning tools implemented by colleagues delivering the international stream.

These include short international experience opportunities; desk based international experience and an optional reflective diary.

Definition of terms

Internationalisation: A process whereby students are exposed to international issues, processes and influences, and are given the opportunity to experience those directly by going abroad or indirectly by staying in Sheffield.,

Work: A complex package combining some or any combination of the following: direct work experience, reflections on types of working and work environments, reflection and study.

Activity details

What we did

A group of colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University designed a new core module (new in 2007-2008) entitled 'Work and Professional Development' for level 5 students enrolled on the BA in Applied Social Sciences at Sheffield Hallam University. In this module students attend a short lecture and seminar series which provides them with an introduction to the sociology of work and employment; the reflective learning skills they need to complete their assessments; career development and planning and advice on participating in a variety of work experiences. They also enrol for one of five streams (chosen from filming and media, international opportunities, research consultancy, voluntary and community, work: paid and unpaid). Each of these streams provide the students with the opportunity to focus on a particular area of work and/or professional development and the tools to reflect on a related workplace. In the case of stream two (International Opportunities) we set out to engage students with work and professional development in an international context by offering them the option of experiencing a different working environment by going abroad (one month maximum) or electing to stay at home to explore an international dimension to UK work contexts.

Why we did it

One of Sheffield Hallam University's key strategic drivers is to increase student exposure and understanding of internationalisation. Another is to increase the employability of SHU students. The new module brought both aspects together. It was felt that existing established contacts made by tutors with overseas departments provided a wealth of opportunities to link up student interests as well as strengthening Sheffield Hallam's own international partnerships within the social sciences.

What we wanted to achieve

Our main aim was to provide social science students with the opportunity to reflect on work experience in ways which increased their awareness of international issues and topics.

A short description of what we did

A maximum of 20 students were permitted onto the international stream (15 in total applied). Six of these students agreed to participate in a research programme set up to provide insight into their experience of the module. The six students had a mixture of prior experiences both in terms of international travel and of work experience. These prior experiences shaped and determined each of their motivations for taking the stream, and also drove much of what they wanted to get out of the module.

In the first semester (culminating in the semester 1 assignment), students negotiated the nature of their work experience with the module tutor. They were encouraged to do much of this work autonomously, with the tutor guiding when and where necessary - the module encouraging students to shape their own learning.

Approximately 5 of the 15 students on the stream wanted to go abroad to do their work experience. Efforts in semester two were made to link up with certain overseas colleagues in order to allow some students to go abroad. In the end, 3 of this group did go overseas, but only one contact provided a 'work-place experience' and that was for one week only. Consequently the experience became more of a 'study trip'. Whilst this wasn't the original intention and/or expectation tutors had of overseas 'work experience', the 'study trip' may be a more realistic and practical model of exchange which could be replicated in future years.

The remaining 'domestic' students either made direct contact with political/social organisations around the world (through tutor contacts) or became involved with the international student body within Sheffield Hallam. These students had a very different experience of internationalisation.

What worked well

- A combination of desk-based and overseas travel provided a nice blend of learning opportunities for students on the module. It meant that 'international' can be experienced by students remaining at home as well as by going overseas.
- Improved partnership with one destination university has created the groundwork for future 'exchange study trips' and more opportunities for future study

Problems and/or issues

- Students spent much of the first semester struggling to formulate a manageable and practical work experience - be that abroad or at home. The tutor felt that many of the students wanting to go abroad were in fact not ready in terms of their own personal maturity (e.g. would they manage being on their own overseas?). Consequently the tutor had strong reservations about the wisdom of sending some students abroad fearing for their safety.
- The students involved were slightly disappointed by the 'study trip' model. Although they talked positively about being embedded into college life, they clearly had an expectation of a more conventional work experience.
- Students working at this level of study may require more help and guidance on formulating their own work experiences than originally thought
- Assessing students' maturity for going abroad and 'doing' some form of work experience is important (institutional responsibilities for them whilst overseas etc)
- It became apparent in interviews with students that there was some disjunction between what they expected from the module and what they experienced in the end. It is important to manage student expectations of 'overseas travel' and 'work experience'
- There are pros and cons to having a stream specifically dedicated to international issues. Giving students the option of choosing to 'do' international may make the topic more accessible. On the other hand, perhaps this is an agenda which needs to be embedded across all modules.

What students thought about it

- For those students who went abroad, the experience was broadly seen as positive and something they were fortunate to have
- Those interviewed felt that their international awareness had increased through the work experience opportunities that they had been exposed to, although they would have liked to have been overseas for longer.
- For some who did not get chance to go abroad, there was disappointment and a feeling that the stream had not delivered (i.e. the opportunity of going overseas)
- There was confusion about what work experience could/should mean within the context of the module.
- Students felt insecure about having to negotiate and formulate their own work experiences. They felt that they would be better placed if they were allocated work experience. The argument being that the security derived from this would enable them to digest international issues more and 'relax into' the work experience.

Key messages

- Providing short work experience opportunities abroad can be problematic in terms of enabling students to have a meaningful experience
- Study trips may be more straightforward to organise and execute, given the short duration of time overseas
- Providing either overseas or desk-based study with an international dimension might be more profitable for the student if they were given specific work experience activities from which to choose, as opposed to them having to negotiate their own from the beginning

Related documents or links

Hudson B. & Todd, M. (2000) (eds.) *Internationalising the Curriculum in Higher Education: reflecting on practice*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press.

Palmer, M. (2002) 'On the pros and cons of volunteering abroad', *Development and Practice*, vol. 12 (5) 637-647.

Darvill, G. and Ashford, A. (2006) *Recruitment and Employability issues in social policy degree courses in Higher Education* (SWAP report)

Case Study 2: Desk based students and international issues

Case Study 3: International work experience (abroad)

Case Study 4: Using reflective diaries within the context of a work and professional development module

Any other comments

In 2008 it was decided that the module would in future attempt to embed international issues within other streams rather than having a specifically 'international' stream. Beyond this particular module, developments are being planned for international modules available for students across the whole Faculty.



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