Career Services as a Bridge between Classroom and Careers

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Abstract

As the job market constantly changes, both graduates and employees must adapt to the rapidly changing workplace. University career services play a crucial role in helping explore career pathways, develop essential skills and become career ready. This presentation examines how career services are adapting to better support undergraduate international students within a liberal arts curriculum. Liberal Arts Education has a long-standing tradition of offering a broad range of courses related to humanities, social and natural sciences, fostering students to think freely and actively contribute to the making of a free society [1]. Beyond subject-specific knowledge, liberal arts emphasise the ability to ask meaningful questions, analyse information critically, understand and solve complex problems, learn how to learn and develop lifelong learning skills and experiential learning [2]. In turn, this becomes a link between academic theory and practical knowledge, allowing students to gain rich firsthand experience. Drawing on the example of the American University in London, this presentation explores how career services tailor their support and resources – such as Richmond Leadership Academy – to help students translate their academic experiences and campus engagement into transferable skills preparing students for the world of work.

Keywords: *Career Services, Transferable skills, Liberal Arts Education, International Students, Richmond Leadership Academy*

1. Introduction

Liberal arts have a special place in American Higher Education embodying an approach that emphasises interdisciplinary understanding in contrast to more specialised education. Looking at this educational philosophy and its elements we will draw parallels with the Career Services, which are the bridges between academic studies and the professional world. We will also have a close look at how the Career Services at Richmond American University London support students and alumni to make informed decisions and develop their skills to navigate transitions and their career pathways.

1.1 Liberal Arts: Meaning and Purpose

Liberal arts (LA) have their origins in the Ancient Greek tradition, in which education consists of grammar, education, dialectics, music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The study of these courses were the foundations of education for young people, preparing them to continue their studies with philosophy. Through these 7 subjects people were educated in oration, reasoning and searching for the truth, qualities useful for free people. The intrinsic value of LA can be understood under three strands [1], [2]. The first strand is contemplation and understanding of the principles of world; the second strand focuses on promotion of skills, such as critical and analytical thinking; while the third one with the commitment to serve not only ourselves, but also others. Shaping resilient, well-skilled and reflective individuals able to adapt to different career pathways able to be part of the solutions for a ‘better world’.

1.2 Career Services and Liberal Arts at Raul

Richmond, the American University London (RAUL) offers both US and UK accredited degrees and offers a LA curriculum both to undergraduate and postgraduate students in subjects across humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. Through core and elective courses students research and analyse contemporary issues, discovering the interconnectivity between subjects and disciplines.

The RAUL Career Services of the University prepare the students not only to further develop their transferable skills but also to approach employability as a process that is both lifelong and life wide. Through an interactive approach students see the lifelong part of employability in the dual direction of

past and future. On one hand, helping them realise that knowledge and skills acquired during school years is pertinent for early careers, as it shows the trajectory of interests of people and on the other hand, seeing that employability is not a state but a continuing process of upskilling and reskilling. At the same time, the life wide element focuses on embracing the experiences coming out of the non-academic activities, such as extra-curricular activities and community service, helping students put into practice the values and shape their mission.

Drawing parallels between the Careers Services (CS) and LA focuses on four areas: exploration and discovery of interests and strengths, development of transferable and employability skills, understanding of patterns and interconnectivity of disciplines and skills, and active citizenship (Fig.1).

University students need to develop their critical and analytical thinking in approaching employability, learning to reflect on their experiences as valuable tools that hone their skills, instead of seeing them as fragments and marginal actions while waiting to be employable.

Fig. 1. Career Services for Liberal Arts

2. Exploration

Higher education aims at offering holistic experiences to its students offering a broad range of experiences from academic excellence to personal development and professional guidance. According to the survey of Office for Education [3] about students' expectations of Universities, among the things that they would like is support to meet their academic and personal needs and engage in extra-curricular activities. Student engagement is much more than attendance and academic success [4], [5] and influenced by internal factors, such as learning environments and pedagogy, but also external such as students' self-concept, time management and attitude to learning.

By choosing to study a LA curriculum, students learn to appreciate the power of intellectual engagement not only with the subject they choose but also with other disciplines examining in a scientific way social, economic and environmental issues [6]. Although specialisation helps students gain in depth knowledge of a specific discipline and immerse themselves into the specifics of their degree, the flexibility of LA help students to reflect on broader issues and explore more academic subjects.

CS also invite students not only to develop technical skills that will help them in their job and job applications, but also to explore their identity, understanding their strengths, weaknesses and interests. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory [7] human growth goes through eight psychosocial stages and during each one the individual has to resolve a major developmental task,

inherent to that stage. In the stage of adolescence, an individual has to deal with the Identity vs Role Confusion, leading either to successful sense of being where the person has a rather clear sense of their direction or to a sense of doubt about their strengths and confusion about their purpose. Identity formation is not a task starting just at the beginning of adolescence and finishing right at its end. It is a lifelong process that starts in childhood, where the individual sets their own expectations about their roles and continues in adulthood, where life changes influence a person's choices and goals. Waterman (1993) argues that college years provide many triggers in identity formation, as a person has to make significant choices in many areas of their life. The Career Rainbow theory by Donald Super [9] emphasises the need to understand the different roles a person has in different stages of their life, entailing a combination of different opportunities, changes and expectations. Through the different roles it is vital that the person understands their past choices and also projects their roles and career decisions in the future into what they might be. Thus, career services need to orient the students not only to goals related to after graduation, but also show the importance of exploring the strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values. By understanding their personal history, seeing possible blind spots, students can make informed decisions about their academic courses and career goals.
At RAUL, students are advised to start creating from the beginning of their studies their employability timeline, setting the roadmap to their employability and the steps they have to take on learning how to better use their academic skills to become more employable at every stage of their studies. By encouraging students to go through self-assessment, as a first step of career planning, they learn to create their profile in platforms, such as the Handshake, so that they can understand the link between interests and skills and job search, as well finding resources and events that best suit their aspirations and needs.

3. Transferability

The dynamic job market calls for highly capable and specialised employees, but also adaptable and resilient. Transferable skills can be developed and applied in any context, are versatile and can be transferred from one job role to another. According to UNICEF's proposed framework [10], transferable skills can be better understood within the 4 dimensions of learning in the:

- Cognitive dimension, the skills mostly developed are critical thinking, creativity/divergent thinking and problem-solving
- Instrumental dimension including the skills of cooperation, negotiation and decision-making
- Personal dimension with the skills of self-management, resilience and communication
- Social dimension with the skills of diversity, empathy and participation.

Employers seek transferable skills, as they seek for candidates who can be flexible and adapt to new situations, such as digital platforms and technological advances, can be adjusted to different roles and act as building blocks for gaining new skills. Candidates also need to be able to demonstrate their transferable skills to advance their employability, set themselves above the competition, and enhance their confidence.
Within the University setting, this set of skills helps students succeed academically, and at the same time is also highly regarded by employers. LA encourages students to develop their transferrable skills, encouraging flexibility and creativity. Courses in research and writing, scientific reasoning foster the further development of critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills. LA curriculum encourages students to sharpen their analytical skills thinking critically to solve complex issues and communicating with respect to individual and cultural differences.
Many changes have been taking place in the workforce landscape during the last years, such as remote and hybrid work patterns after the pandemic, and expanding use of AI. Responding to emergent issues, such as scarcity of skilled personnel, recruitment practices tend to move beyond the traditional methods to more innovative practices, seeking for candidates with a strong work ethic, problem solving and communication skills. Career services aim to help students understand the types of skills needed for different roles. As important as becoming aware of one's values, strengths and weaknesses are, as fundamental is to train young people on how to market their transferable skills to employers showing how their skills align with their person specifications.
As the motto of RAUL is 'Unity in diversity', the cultivation not only of tolerance but of celebration of differences, is a value diffused and weaved into all aspects of the curriculum. A collaboration between the LA department and the Career Services, has resulted in offering tailor-made workshops to students during their LA courses, which aim at helping them recognise employability skills both in work-related tasks but also in extra-curricular activities and volunteering. Educating people how to reflect on their experiences, analyse them, articulate their achievements and export the transferable

skills encourages them to see it as an ongoing competence, which is especially important through transitions, changing roles and career pathways.

4. Interconnection

Living in an interconnected world means that the Universities engage with multiple communities and stakeholders. Learning is not confined within a classroom, but situated in a discipline, connected with other disciplines, people and action [11].
Understanding that work experience is part of a long series of actions in the job search is a central message towards students, offering them opportunities to network with industry experts, research sectors and learn about businesses. Especially, through internships available for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, students learn through hands on experience how industry actually works. Although they come in different forms to suit different needs and preferences (in person, virtual, in the UK, international), the fundamental principle is to prepare students, among others, to apply theoretical knowledge into action, refine academic and professional goals and open direct communication links with industry professionals. At RAUL, both undergraduate and postgraduate students who undertake credit-bearing internships create a portfolio showcasing their internship experience and prepare themselves for future employment.
Another strand of encouraging networking between students and alumni acting as mentors. This networking allows alumni mentors to model attitudes, explain implicit workplace rules and dynamics to student mentees. Learning about finding the work-life balance, transitions, intercultural communication are insights that challenge students' views and at the same time support reviewing their thoughts and feelings.

5. **Active Citizenship**

University education fosters collaboration through many avenues, such as teamwork in assignments, putting the individual in a continuous dialogue not only with knowledge and academics but also with classmates, thus challenging the individual to develop their communication and leadership skills, preparing them for the workplace.
Students in LA are encouraged to engage in social issues, seeing themselves as part of a broader picture, intertwining their personal skills and academic knowledge with active citizenship and exploring their higher purpose. Community service and working on projects serving local communities are some of the pathways through which students are exposed to emerge into real life problems and use their skills to finding feasible solutions. According to Westheimer [12], [13], there are 3 types of active citizens:

- Personally responsible, the person who acts responsibly and responds to organised calls for engaging with actions that help the community
- Participatory, the person who understands the policy of organisations and participates in meetings and groups organising volunteering actions
- Justice-oriented, the person who moves beyond charity, is interested in the roots of problems and is committed to social change.

Volunteering in a consistent way can lead to enhanced career prospects, as students get work experience, develop employability skills, foster their self-development and become fully engaged in a democratic society. Promoting active citizenship through the CS engages students with problem-solving as a result of collaboration and creativity, empowered by commitment to shared goals and aiming at sustainable solutions.
More specifically, at RAUL, as one of the ways to promote responsible leadership, CS encourage students to engage in Richmond Leadership Academy (Fig. 2). Students can work their way through four levels of awards, combining service learning, theoretical training, active involvement in campus life and reflection. Reflecting Westheimer & Kahn's active citizen framework, volunteering is the thread running throughout Richmond Leadership Academy as one way for students to develop their agency, their self-directedness and self-regulated action. In the first level, Bronze award, students are invited to be campus contributors, engaging with the University community and campus life, evaluating their skills and joining in seminars. In the second level, Silver award, students are seen as community members, working to make their environment a better place for all, improving the community and joining a leadership team. Moving on to the third level, the Gold award, aims at cultivating the concept of student as a citizen, who looks to the wider community and industry sector to initiate action change.

Finally, at the Platinum award, students engage more actively in leadership roles and networking events in campus or workplace.

Fig. 2. Richmond Leadership Academy

6. Conclusion

Career Services should not be seen as a stand alone, good to use service offered by Universities. They not only complement academic curriculum but can play a pivotal role in identity exploration, serve as a common thread uniting a person's life history, and engage in active citizenship. Career services along with LA curriculum help students can help students gain a holistic perspective between

disciplines, careers and society, encouraging them to re-evaluate their personal and career trajectory and see their career goals not only as fulfilment of their potential but as an integral part of their community and society. In the rapidly changing technological landscape, which permeates almost all aspects of living, preparing students to learn how to adapt to new challenges, using their inner resources to fuel motivation and analysing trends not just to follow them but to ride the waves seem to be imperative and timely more than ever.

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