



DEPICT: Developing Employability Programmes using Interactive Curriculum Technologies

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Abstract

University careers and employability services are increasingly under pressure to deliver more with less – to reach more students and graduates with less resources. Interactive learning technologies can offer a solution to this challenge by enabling programmes to be ‘scaled up’ to meet a wider number of beneficiaries.

The University of Salford, in partnership with University Miguel Hernandez (Spain), University of Agders (Norway), Riga International School of Economics and Business Administration (Latvia), The Business Group (UK), Business Confederation of the Province of Alicante (Spain), Entrepreneurship Training Academy (Norway) and the Motion Picture Industry of Latvia (Latvia) successfully bid to the ERASMUS Lifelong Learning Programme for funding to develop a programme of online employability skills training to be tested on students from each partner countries.

The project has worked with employers from Creative and Cultural small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in each country in the partnership to understand the skills they require from graduates, and gain a European perspective on employer needs in this fast-growing sector.

The workshops established a core set of employability skills valued by businesses in the creative and cultural sector across Europe – creativity, entrepreneurship, ICT skills and self-awareness. A programme of seminars is being created to develop these skills in students from each country in the partnership using four distinct learning technologies to deliver the training. Each country has one skill and one technology to develop, forming a coherent curriculum across the partnership.

The proposed paper will focus on disseminating findings of the project so far and some interim observations, particularly with regards to experiences of working with employers across a diverse range of economic climates and the challenges of creating a cohesive and relevant programme of learning for students in all the partner countries.

Introduction

DEPICT: Developing Employability Programmes using Interactive Curriculum Technologies is a project with two key aims: firstly, to understand the skills that small and medium-sized enterprises in the Creative and Cultural Industries require from graduates wishing to enter the sector; secondly, research and evaluate the effectiveness of using interactive technologies for developing employability skills in these students.

The project's main target audience is staff working in HEIs and other educational establishments in roles related to employability and employability development. However, the nature of the project means that businesses, learning technologists, academics and policy-makers will also have an interest in the projects outcomes. Students also form an important audience for the project as they will test the technologies and ultimately provide the necessary feedback needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the technologies.

DEPICT's objectives are:

- To engage and conduct research with SMEs in the Creative and Cultural Industries to understand the skills they require from graduates
- To procure, install, customise and test four distinct interactive learning technologies
- To develop and deliver a series of on-line seminars to students from across the partnership to develop the key employability skills identified by the research with Creative and Cultural SMEs



- To thoroughly evaluate all aspects of the effectiveness of the chosen technologies and seminars delivered from the perspectives of the learners, trainers, project staff and SMEs
- To disseminate project findings through a number of channels (i.e. website, Twitter, conference presentations, online seminars/webinars etc) to reach local, regional, national and European audiences.

To achieve the aims and objectives of the project, the project brings together the shared knowledge and expertise of universities from four European countries, namely Latvia, Norway, Spain and the UK, with each university working closely with a local business organisation. Each university in the partnership has expertise in employer engagement and developing employability and enterprise programmes. Each University is also ideally geographically positioned for work with Creative and Cultural Industries – for example, the University of Salford has a campus at MediaCityUK, a major national and international digital creative hub.

The project follows a robust research methodology directly related to achieving its objectives:

- Review current literature relating to employer requirements from graduates, research good practice in using interactive learning technologies for developing employability skills and evaluate the success of a previous ERASMUS-funded enterprise project
- Conduct research with SMEs from the Creative and Cultural Sector to identify the skills they require from graduates
- Conduct a series of online seminars using a section of interactive learning technologies to students in each partner university
- Evaluate the experiences of all key stakeholders who engage with the interactive technologies (learners, trainers, businesses)
- Publish and disseminate findings and feedback

The research phase of the project was completed in May 2012, resulting in 3 reports and a set of case studies:

- 'A review of Enterprise Bootcamps' – reviewing past practice in developing enterprise and employability skills in graduates from Norway, Latvia and the UK
- 'Understanding employer's needs across Europe' – a literature review of graduate employability research
- 'A review of the existing uses of technology and E-learning in the delivery of employability skills training both in higher education and beyond – a review of best practice in online learning
- A set of case studies on how online learning technologies are currently used in the partner HEIs.

More information about the project can be found on the project website: www.depict.eu.

Workshops with Creative and Cultural Industry Small and Medium sized Enterprises

Between July and September 2012, the partnership undertook research with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Creative and Cultural Industries. The purpose of these workshops was to understand the skills and competencies employers from the sector required from graduates wishing to enter the sector. Each country in the partnership (Latvia, Norway, Spain, UK) undertook research with employers in their region. The key objective of this work was to agree a set of four essential competencies that graduates wishing to enter the sector should possess. These competencies are to be developed into online learning seminars later in the project.

The skills were identified in three ways – firstly through the research previously undertaken as part of the project (available at www.depict.eu), secondly through a questionnaire sent to businesses in each partner country which gathered quantitative data (UK, Spain, Latvia, Norway), and finally through a workshop held with employers in each country which produced qualitative data. The results were then discussed by partners and businesses at a Colloquium in Spain. From this Colloquium, four competencies were agreed, which will form the basis of a programme of employability skills development to be taught to students later in the project.

60 employers responded to the questionnaire and 53 employers attended the workshops held by the partnership.



Finally, a Colloquium took place which gathered 15 participants from 4 countries. The Colloquium successfully led to a consensus being reached -the four skills chosen for further development in the project were agreed as well as which partner would develop will be developing seminars to teach them:

Questionnaire to Businesses

The survey to employers was based on the skills identified by the earlier project report “Understanding employer skills’ needs across Europe” (referred to above). Each partner country sent the survey to creative and cultural SMEs in their own country.

The results from the questionnaire sent to employers gave a clear indication across the partnership (and arguably Europe) that employers require a higher level of skills in potential employees and that the well-educated are best placed to respond to this need, which is good news for graduates across the board. The growth area for employment tends to be at professional/ associate professional level in terms of occupations. Certain employment sectors also have more growth, though this does vary from country to country.

The survey made it possible to define the most important competences and skills required from graduates in each country and compare responses from different partners.

In the UK the top five skills identified employers require from graduates were identified as:

1. Ability to learn
2. Motivation
3. Team work
4. Communication
5. Quality and improvement focus

Employers also identified digital and ICT skills as very important in hiring new graduates.

The Norwegian participants ranked the five most important competencies as:

1. Responsibility
2. Digital skills
3. Communication skills
4. Motivation
5. Story and narrative skills.

When these choices were discussed further in the business workshop and the colloquium, it emerged that in Norway, graduates are hired as juniors, and get junior work. Raising funds and expertise in creativity are expected from more experienced staff, but not from juniors. Our respondents said that skills within design are important for designers, but not particular important for other positions as for instance tourism or journalism.

In Spain, the most valuable skills identified were:

1. Ability to learn
2. Motivation
3. Creativity
4. =Information and Communication Technology skills.
4. =Teamwork
4. =Problem solving.

Some important competences or skills related to employability not mentioned in the survey such as legal knowledge, enthusiasm and proactivity, were proposed by employers.

In Latvia, the top five skills identified as required from were:

1. Communication
2. Problem solving
3. Responsibility
4. Team work
5. Digital skills

Interestingly, employers specifically identified digital skills as being important as well as the more general skills such as communication and problem solving.



The questionnaire showed that broadly, employers in Creative and Cultural Industries from across the partnership seek very similar skills in the graduates they hire. This has interesting and largely positive implications for graduate mobility.

Workshops with Businesses

In order to interrogate the questionnaire data more deeply and gain some qualitative data, each partner held a ½ day workshops with a selection of creative and cultural SMEs. The main objective of the workshop was to identify which four competencies the employers felt were most important in the graduates they recruited

The UK employers who attended the workshop all found it a positive and useful experience. All employers is that it is absolutely essential for graduates to have an understanding of the business context in which they wish to work (to know about trends/threats and opportunities in their business of choice). However, it was felt that commercial awareness was not a skill in itself, but should underpin the other skills.

Ultimately the four chosen skills were:

- Verbal and Written Communication skills
- Creativity
- Motivation
- Working under pressure

Norwegian industry representatives in the workshops came up with the following four main points:

- Commercial understanding
- Interpersonal skills
- Creativity
- Ability/skill of getting things done and completing what's begun

During the meeting in Spain, participants discussed the need to include one skill not included in the questionnaire but that they considered very important for new graduates – the ability to “know how to sell and know how to self oneself”.

The four skills most valued were:

- Information and Communication Technology skills
- Teamwork
- Creativity.
- Know how to sell and how to sell oneself

The Latvian workshop brought together academics from the University as well as CEO's from Latvia's leading companies in film, animation, commercial advertising and game design to evaluate the potential for growth in Latvia's audiovisual sector, the preparedness of current graduates to enter the competitive audiovisual market, the global demands required in the industry, and initiate the changes in education to meet the challenges the global creative sector imposes on them.

The three skills most valued were:

- Adaptation to changes
- Business and Entrepreneurial Competence
- Intellectual Property (understanding how to manage the intellectual property one might produce)

The most important competences identified by professionals of the different countries are general skills like teamwork, motivation, working under pressure and commercial understanding. The only common skill which the UK, Spain and Norway all agreed on was creativity.

Colloquium

In September 2012, the University Miguel Hernandez hosted a Colloquium to analyse and evaluate the research gathered from employers. The main objective of the Colloquium was to agree, as partnership the four skills that would be developed into online learning seminars later in the project, and who would lead on each skill.

The key skills selected and allocated were:

- Creativity – Spain



- Entrepreneurship – Norway
- Information and Communication Technology – Latvia
- Personal Development/Self Awareness – UK

A full report on the data collected from the business workshops is available at <http://depict.eu/>.

Next Steps

The next phase of DEPICT is to develop online learning seminars based on the four skills identified in the Colloquium. Each partner has selected a technology which they will use to teach their allocated skills.

The technologies selected are:

- Schoology (www.schoolology.com) – Spain
- Launchplan (www.launchplan.com) – Norway
- European Employability Engine (no web address as yet as bespoke) – Latvia
- Careerhub (www.careerhub.info) - UK

The online learning seminars will take place during September and October 2013 and results published on the DEPICT website in December 2013.