Description and Evaluation of Student-led Employability Audit

University of Manchester

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As it stands, the School of Mathematics has used a framework provided by the University of Exeter to assess the impact of it's degree programmes on students' employability skills. The framework was slightly modified so that: Firstly, the companies targeted by graduating Maths students were surveyed to ensure that we were auditing the right skills and secondly so that extra curricular modules and activities were also scored. This has resulted in a final report containing:

- A module-by-module breakdown of skills development;

- Proposals to adapt existing courses so that the school can, using simple changes, affect students' development, and

- Proposals for new courses or extra-curricular activities to ensure students are getting the best from their degree.

The audit was completed with an in-depth written analysis of each module so that, if necessary, one can see how each module earned it's score. The report is intended to be an internal document that the audit team can use as supporting evidence when it comes to making the attached proposals.

The Audit was carried out over a period of 12 weeks with 12 mathematics students on a variety of degree programmes offered by the school, who were recruited via email. During the audit time, the team met once a week, and a blog was created as a chance to communicate outside of these meetings.

One of the key issues which occured during the audit process was one of interpretation. We started the audit with well defined skills agreed on by the companies we surveyed before the process. However, we still found that most of the discussion which took place was based on how individual auditors interpreted those definitions and because of this we still see some

irregularity in the final table. Other issues included finding an appropriate meeting time for 12 individuals who each take a different degree programme and in the end we decided that two seperate meetings a week would be most feasible.

Now that the audit has been completed and we are looking to make the proposals for change, we are seeing the emergence of another issue - academic staff who seem unable (or unwilling) to cater for change. This can be addressed by making proposals that appeal to those staff members - options such as "less lecturing hours" seem like a fair rebuttal to those who say that they don't have enough time to teach differently.

A dissemination event took place in Exeter in June 2012 to evaluate the framework with other audit teams. Benefits of this included the suggestions for improving the framework as well as methods for dealing with the issues we found (such as using Skype to get groups of students to communicate).

In hindsight, one problem with the output of the audit is that the way of scoring modules from 0 to 3 using integer values seems very innaccurate. The tables are supposed to be simplistic so that general trends can be seen (and this holds true, with other Universities using radar charts to display the data at the dissemination event) however to sum up the opinion of many students into one digit is very wide-sweeping, especially considering different individuals have (sometimes largely) different experiences. It has been discussed that the use of certain automated software (such as `Atlas.ti`) can aid the coding of textual data into numerical format.

The ultimate success of the project will be seen in the level of change that it produces within the school. For the audit to suggest that a great deal of change is needed and net affect none would be a great shame.

For the project to be opened up and made available to various departments throughout the country, care will have to be taken in the individual skills targeted by the audit on a department-by-department basis. This is because certain graduates will be applying for roles in different areas, and so the required skillsets will be different. One suggestion that seems sustainable is for every team to produce radar charts of both their own audit scores (for each module, or course year, for example) and of those skills valued by companies (this could be achieved by asking the relevant industry to rank skills in order of importance).

The audit has been a great way to produce supporting evidence for change that students have been wanting, especially at a time when students are having to really consider the financial implications of a degree. In addition, completing the audit has been fun as well as an opportunity for personal professional development.