**Students as Academic Partners Project:**

**Audit of team work practice within Worcester Business School**

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## Abstract

The overarching aim of the Student Academic Partners (SAP) Project Scheme is to integrate students into University communities which actively support student learning. A planned audit of current team working practices was considered to be a suitable vehicle for such a partnership.

The notion of team working is particularly highly prized by employers. University tutors increasingly utilise strategies to enhance team working experience and practice. Such skills are important in a curriculum which places an emphasis on enhancing employability and engagement skills. Whilst not all students see the benefit, prospective employers are keen to recruit those with a high level of skill. Employability skills in general are now routinely embedding in modules.

An audit of undergraduate modules found that approximately one third of modules include some element of team working theory, practice and/or assessment. A position early in the academic year was found to be prevalent, suggesting an impact on future practice. Not all modules where team working is a part of the assessment pattern were found to include theory and practice, but the mandatory nature of such modules suggests that previous learning has taken place before the commencement of the module under scrutiny. Some subjects were found utilise individual working practices throughout.

## Introduction

The impetus for this project arose from regular discussions about enhancing the student experience and issues around supporting students. A recent discussion considered team working practices within the Business School. At this time the opportunity to work with the ‘*Students as Academic Partners’* (SAP) initiative arose. Bringing the two together a suggestion was made to audit current practice and discover how and when team working skills were taught, practiced and assessed across the Undergraduate and Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes within Worcester Business School (WBS).

## 

## Key Research

Partners from industry report that team working is a crucial employability skill sought by prospective employers. WBS courses include a range of employability skills to enhance future graduates’ prospects, but what was unclear was when and if team working skills and theory were taught, practiced and accessed. Questions also arose regarding the timetabling and format for activities and assessments.

Yorke (2006) defined employability as “*a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation, which benefits themselves, the workforce, and community and the economy*” and suggests that employability skills should be ‘*strongly aligned with the academic valuing of good learning’.* Kalfa and Taksa (2015) discussed the increasing interest in the development of employability skills by the fact that universities have commitment to such skills in “*graduate attributes”.*

Whilst there is a great deal of literature extolling the virtues of graduate employability skills, in seeking specific academic research on team working the results were less defined.

Whatley (2012) researched team working together with planning and communication skills. Fatmi, Hartling, Hiller, Campbell and Oswald (2013) considered team based learning and discussed the benefits of taking a student-centred active learning approach. However, Whatley (2012) also cautioned that it should be acknowledged that team working in a student context is different to that in a workplace environment and that consideration should be given to the fact that there is a growing use of team working within organisations. She emphasised that universities must produce graduates with knowledge and experience of team working.

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## Our Approach

The team were keen to carry out an audit of available documentation (module outlines and assignment briefs) but were mindful of potential sensitivity around some module content. All signed a confidentiality agreement but the team were not exposed to any potentially sensitive data such as grade profiles. The team also felt that contact with module tutors was not required at this stage, but could be a potential option should the project develop further in the future. All modules were either Undergraduate or HND, positioned within WBS, but were not specifically identified by name or number for the purposes of the project.

## Findings

In total, 67 Business and 31 Computing modules were audited. Business represented 68% and Computing 32% of the modules audited. However, 64 (65%) modules were disregarded as there was no evidence of team working practices within the module documentation. 9 (9%) of modules were disregarded as incomplete data was available.

The team therefore, enquired deeper into the available documentation for 26% of modules, resulting in a working sample of 23 modules. 22 modules were found to show evidence in their schedules that team working skills were both taught and practiced. This represented sixteen modules in semester 1, four in semester 2 and two modules where team working was scheduled in both semester 1 and semester 2. The position within the semesters was also considered but no significance was found, although there was some bunching of activities at the beginning of each semester. In considering the assessment methods employed across the modules, presentations featured highly and the overall pattern is represented in the table below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Assessment method** | **BUSM** | **COMP** |
| Presentation | 5 | 1 |
| Presentation & report | 3 | 2 |
| Presentation & poster | 1 |  |
| Presentation & portfolio |  | 1 |
| Presentation & business plan |  | 1 |
| Showcase and artefact |  | 3 |
| Individual report & group research |  | 1 |
| Individual & group portfolio |  | 1 |
| Team charity project |  | 1 |
| Group pitch | 2 |  |
| Feedback | 1 |  |
| **Total** | **12** | **11** |

## Observations

For Business modules it was found that for two modules, team work was assessed but not taught or located in the learning outcomes. This was considered to be a significant finding as this meant either the module leader thought the students had studied this topic in a previous module or it was a simple oversight. One module showed evidence of teaching and practice sessions but was not assessed. This was discussed by the team and considered to be acceptable under the umbrella of a broad interest in the subject. Three modules were identified as providing good practice with regard to teaching, practice and assessment of team working. All were at Level 4 and therefore offered foundation skills for future practice. Two modules were mandatory and so these early foundations were explicit.

For Computing modules, findings showed that there does not always appear to be a corresponding seminar following a team work lecture. However, this was considered to be acceptable if practiced elsewhere. In one module, the percentage of team work mark vs individual mark was not made clear from the documentation. However, in another module this percentage was made very clear and suggested better transparency.

## The Students’ View

At the end of the project the two student partners reflected upon their experience and concluded that they had developed many skills which could be taken forward to future their university work and beyond.

* *Team Work:* working with new people of differing ages and experiences.
* *Communication:* particularly emailing to keep in contact and share information between the regular meetings.
* *Report writing:* in general and the new experience of writing for publication.
* *Research Skills*: a new skill of auditing of documentation.
* *Confidentiality:* learning about the University ethics process, project approval document, confidentiality agreement and ethical approval.
* *Attention to detail:* deciding together what should be audited and ensuring that the right information was scrutinised.
* *Presentation skills*: first time presenting at a conference.
* *Time management:* making time for meetings and looking into the documents around university work, lectures and marking commitments.
* *Reflective Practice:* learning by doing and agreeing targets for future practice.
* *Decision making*: task allocation and deciding what to put into the final audit document.
* *Leadership:* autonomy to get on with the job in hand and being trusted.

The skills identified as being enhanced during the project were also those aligned with expectations of students involved in team working from their modules.

In addition the students felt that their SAP journey had added to their CV, they anticipated that their employment prospects would be enhanced and they felt the project would be an interesting topic for discussion at interview.

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## The Tutors’ View

The project tutors also reflected upon the experience of working with two Level 5 students. They had jointly worked with two other students on a previous project and welcomed the opportunity to do so again. All the applicants were Business students; it was surprising that no Computing students wished to take up the invitation as all WBS undergraduates have team projects to undertake. The chosen students were conscientious in their practice and participated fully in discussions and decision making. It was refreshing to have fresh impetus from differing perspectives.

Tutors are always keen to enhance the experience for the students and the process of completing this project and the results prompted some reflection as to how we could improve the offering to students. The results, even though there is further research required, are going to be very useful in enhancing the programme.

## 

## Recommendations

* Find out why 65% of modules do not contain any element of team working. This could possibly be incorporated in a future project.
* Learn from good practice modules. Level 4 modules in particular demonstrated good practice with regarding to their team work element.
* Dissemination and discussion with module teams. This would enhance the findings by adding a further dimension.
* Research informed practice. A number of local employers engage in WBS activities. It would therefore enhance the findings to ascertain their opinion of team working, and in particular what they expect from new employees.
* An audit of current team working practice could be considered for other courses to help inform future practice.
* An audit of current practice with regard to other employability skills could also help inform future practice.

## References

Fatmi M, Hartling L, Hillier T, Campbell S and Oswald A (2013) *The effectiveness of team-based learning on learning outcomes in health professions education* BEME Guide No. 30 35: 1608-1624

Kalfa S and Taksa L (2015) *Cultural capital in business higher education: reconsidering the graduate attributes movement and the focus on employability*, Studies in Higher Education, 40: 4: 580-595, May 2015

Whatley J (2012) Evaluation of a Team Project Based Learning Module for Developing Employability Skills in *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology* Vol 9 (2012) [online] Google Books

Yorke M (2006) '*Employability in Higher Education: what it is - what it is not*', Higher Education Academy (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team)

The following were accessed on 2/6/15 to ascertain approaches to team working and employability skill:

<http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/teamwork>

<http://www.ntu.ac.uk/employability/>

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/teamwork.htm>

<http://www.worc.ac.uk/edu/1118.htm>

<http://usemyability.com/skills/teamwork.html>

## Conference presentation





