

When Education met Innovation met Employability: Using processes of social innovation and curriculum design as a vehicle for service redesign and organisation change to effect culture shift within a department of the University of Northampton

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Abstract

This working paper explores a unique service design intervention at the University of Northampton combining the academic (re-)design process known as CAleRO¹ with social innovation ideation methodology. The intervention was used to provide an Employability offering to all 14,000 students enrolled at the University that would better prepare them for graduate employment as well as meet institutional objectives around social innovation and impact and deliver a 'student experience of the highest quality' (The University of Northampton, 2010). Following an overview of the process, a number of pertinent questions are raised about the implications and appropriateness of the chosen method.

This paper is designed to be read in conjunction with its accompanying Prezi presentation, which can be found at: <http://prezi.com/z0vhypgs8ve5/when-education-met-innovation-met-employability/>

Introduction

This paper describes the service redesign of the University of Northampton's Centre for Employability and Engagement (UCEE) using a novel methodology that combined the University programme and module (re-)design process known as CAleRO with that of social innovation ideation². The creation of UCEE marked the coming together under one head of three teams: the Careers and Employability Service, the University's Volunteering and the HE Schools Engagement team. There was an institutionally identified need that the Centre not only had to offer a scaleable employability service to all 14,000 University students but also to build one united

¹ This process is known as CAleRO - Creating Aligned Interactive educational Resource Opportunities. It is an extension of the Carpe Diem workshop developed at the University of Leicester. For more information on CAleRO see Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2014a). An outline of the Carpe Diem process can be found in Salmon *et al* (2008) and Armellini and Jones (2008).

² The process of social innovation implemented in this service redesign project is that contained in The Open Book of Social Innovation (Murray *et al* (2010).

team from three. In addition, the new service had to implement wider elements of institutional strategy, specifically that of embedding social innovation at the heart of all areas of University activity³.

Although initial work had commenced around this service redesign⁴, it wasn't until March 2014 that the real development work began. The plan, as it stood, was to use the CAleRO workshop and bring in elements of social innovation methodology as appropriate to develop the service delivery strategy and, at the same time, to try and overcome the pre-existing team structures that were still evident. Contingency plans were built in from the start to mitigate against a number of perceived difficulties with the methodology, specifically: (1) the fact that we were using an academic process (CAleRO) to design a professional service; and (2) the requirement that was being placed upon professional services staff to engage with an academic process and be socially innovative at the same time. To this end, we allowed three days for the CAleRO (traditionally they last for 2 days) and were prepared to adapt the process and be flexible with the timings as necessary on the way.

The Intervention

The first part of the CAleRO is to write a (programme/module) blueprint. This part was broadly successful - a new mission statement for UCEE was largely finalised that introduced new terminology around employability shared by all participants. The service 'look and feel' was agreed - it was to offer opportunities for active discovery; provide an individual or personalised experiences; include a reflective log or blog; use authentic resources in the field of employability and adopt a blended approach. UCEE staff had already identified 10 Employability Skills adapted into the Northampton context and written as Learning Outcomes⁵. This resulted in the emerging service being framed in academic terminology e.g. learning outcomes, assessment requirements, attainment and validation.

The second stage of CAleRO is the storyboard where a constructive alignment approach (Biggs, 2003) is used to build the various elements of the programme into a coherent whole. For UCEE this was about looking at how to use a 'flipped' classroom approach to prepare students for face-to-face sessions with UCEE. So students come to workshops with their first draft CV already written and the session is used to improve and enhance this draft as opposed to writing it in the first place.

³ This commitment to social innovation arose out of the 2010-2015 institutional strategy, *Raising the Bar* (The University of Northampton, 2010) and is evidenced in the University's designation as the first Ashoka U Changemaker campus in the UK (Ashoka, n.d.).

⁴ Irwin and Mercer (2013) had previously identified a Development Strategy for the Centre and this had developed into a language related to employability that adapted the employability skills identified in a CBI/NUS joint report of 2011 into a framework to suit the Northampton context (Irwin and Carter, 2014) and expressed as Employability Learning Outcomes.

⁵ Irwin and Carter, 2014

Although the CAleRO approach was the primary methodology in use, it was during the storyboard that the Social Innovation Spiral proved its worth. Trying to 'build' the new UCEE service was not as straightforward as perhaps was expected and, to use the terminology of the spiral, we needed to remain in the proposal-prototype phase for substantially longer than the pure CAleRO methodology would anticipate in order to overcome the residual 'silo' thinking and terminology that had resurfaced with the second iteration of the storyboard (a.k.a. the 'vomit board'⁶). A full-team debrief on the morning of day 3 was designed to address this and to return to the shared language around employability as opposed to careers, and to return the student and the development of his/her employability skills to the heart of the redesign. This was substantially aided by the arrival midway through the third day of representatives of the Students Union. In particular, their presence forced a reconsideration of the attempt to use an academic framework to support employability - students do not approach their employability as a 3-year academic programme. They also confirmed the move to situate the student at the heart of the service, rather than the focus being on what the service can provide to those students who choose to engage with it. While this sounds obvious given the heavy emphasis across the HE sector on student experience, their input provided that much-needed reminder of this following the loss of direction with the 'vomit board'. Finally, they worked with us to co-create some of the flipped learning activities. Their presence kick-started development of a second strand of the emerging Employability Plus service, namely Employability Plus Fast Track which is geared towards students who would not engage with UCEE until their graduation was fast-approaching. Ultimately, both elements of the service provided a student-centred offer with a desire to enable our students to become Changemakers⁷ within a graduate employability framework through the development of their employability skills set.

Once the skeleton framework for Employability Plus was in place, we continued with the CAleRO process as staff began to create the online learning activities to help with the development of an individual's employability skills. Specifically, this was: to build a prototype online, check reality, review and adjust (based on feedback from the review stage) and plan the next steps. Additional training was subsequently provided to staff following the CAleRO, primarily to help with use of the University Virtual Learning System known as NILE⁸ which was the chosen tool for delivery of the flipped and online parts of Employability Plus.

Results

On 17 August, just 4 months after the 3-day CAleRO intervention, UCEE offered Employability Plus to all students enrolled at the University of Northampton, including those finalising their places upon receipt of their 'A' Level results. The offer consisted

⁶ This is shown visually in the accompanying Prezi: Irwin *et al* (2014).

⁷ Ashoka, n.d.

⁸ Northampton Integrated Learning Environment

of 50 online activities covering all 10 of the 'learning outcomes', integrated with 15 workshops tied together with an initial self-assessment audit of an individual's employability skills. By the end of the autumn term, over 2,800 students had completed the initial self-assessment with around 1,600 actively engaging with the online and face-to-face elements of Employability Plus.

During this same period, the UCEE team has also changed. Some staff found the CAleRO process easy to understand and engage with and were able to adapt their role to accommodate the new ways of working that had emerged. Others have taken longer to find their place within the new team and to see how they could contribute under the new framework. A small number left the team entirely, citing dissatisfaction with the new service model as their reason for leaving. The corollary of these resignations has been an opportunity to recruit staff against the new framework and a different type of candidate has been employed. The team is evidencing new skills, demonstrating a different approach to their role and a more explicitly student-focussed mindset.

Next Steps

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from this intervention. Many of these will be explored more fully in a future publication but current work is focussing on the following issues:

1. Appropriateness of NILE to deliver Employability Plus
2. The success (or otherwise) of the chosen additional softwares to integrate with each other to produce the desired outcomes
3. Effectiveness of Employability Plus to improve graduate employability
4. Refining of the online activities to show progression and demonstrate clear skills development
5. Ways of increasing engagement with Employability Plus from the currently non-engaged element of the student population
6. Ways of incentivising staff and accrediting/acknowledging their own professional development

In addition, it is pertinent to raise the following questions from the type of intervention described in this paper. Specifically:

1. How appropriate is it to frame employability skills and their associated learning outcomes using terminology drawn from a Higher Education context?
2. How appropriate was this combined intervention to service redesign and can it deliver a scaleable method of delivery?
3. How effective was this methodology in achieving the secondary aim of achieving team unification?

4. Are there any recommendations for professional recognition and accreditation that emerge from using an academic process in a professional services context?

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