In for the Long Haul – Models of Sustained Graduate Support and Education

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Abstract
This practitioner presentation seeks to articulate the problem of lack of timeliness in standard models of support for graduating students in relation to enterprise and employability. It will demonstrate how drawing together employability and enterprise support in the period after graduation can address that problem.

An extensive enterprise education literature exists, with studies mostly focussed on curricula or extra-curricula support before graduation and largely separate from careers service provision. Some work has been done to map the student journey after graduation, for example Rae and Woodier (2005), who make a strong point about careers services needing to be joined up with enterprise education, but examples of good practice are limited.

The presentation will focus on innovate practice on MMU Centre for Enterprise-led programmes supporting graduates up to three years after leaving university, addressing skills for graduate entrepreneurship and employability. It will address the role of universities in engagement with employers to work more closely with HEIs and students. The presentation will examine the importance of links between theory and practice in delivery settings. It will emphasise what research tells us about the importance of timeliness in support for graduates and will therefore contribute to the debate about models of enterprise education.
Introduction, objectives and context

This practitioner paper focuses on enterprise education and graduate employment support, drawing on practice to articulate lessons learned and to raise some questions about future work in this area. It also provides a narrative of a knowledge exchange (KE) within the Centre for Enterprise (CfE) at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School and demonstrates how KE has the potential to enhance the delivery of enterprise education. A critical part of this process was a KE conference organised which drew delivery staff from separately funded and differently focused graduate support programmes together with researchers working in this area. This paper is one outcome of our collaboration. Others include a strengthened commitment to combine research and practice in this area to inform our delivery of enterprise education.

Objectives

The objectives in relation to the graduate support element of the paper are to:

- Articulate some problems with support for graduating students in relation to enterprise and employability, specifically the timeliness of support and the difficulty of achieving graduate employment in small businesses;
- Outline current good practice in relation to these problems; and
- Discuss the potential to draw together employability and enterprise support in the period after graduation.

Context for the paper

The authors are based within CfE, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School and include non-research staff from the ESF Graduate Employability project (NCEE, 2013), and the ERDF North West HE Enterprise Champions programme (ESF-works, 2013) in addition to Research Associates with projects in nascent and graduate entrepreneurship.

The paper is one outcome of a KE conference for CfE staff in May 2013. This sought to reinforce our channels of communication aside from day to day work and took the form of a team away day. The process of developing the programme with the team was as - if not more - important than the day itself and, rather than define session themes at the outset we asked people to suggest contributions that would most effectively illustrate an aspect of their work to promote discussion about how we could work better together, and develop new ideas. Six themes emerged and we planned these as parallel sessions, actively seeking to gain a mix of research and practice material in each session. This paper developed from a session titled ‘The student journey’.
Prior work

There is a well developed literature on enterprise education, (e.g. De Clercq et al, 2001; Gibb, 1993; Hannon, 2004; Jones and English, 2004; Kuratko, 2005; Nabi et al, 2006; Pittaway and Cope 2007) with studies mostly focussed on curricula or extra-curricular support up to the point of graduation. This is largely separate from careers service provision. Some work has been done to map the student journey after graduation, for example Rae and Woodier (2006) who make a strong point about enterprise and employment being closely linked and careers services needing to be joined up with enterprise education. It is, they argue, “not simply about ‘being’ or ‘not being’ an entrepreneur but a process of ‘becoming’ an enterprising person” (p41). Within a work context, the concept of intrapreneurship (Carrier, 1994; Kuratko et al, 1993) highlights the overlap between the two areas in a practical sense and this is reinforced by our experience where employers tell us that what they really value in graduates are the softer skills and attributes of confidence, opportunity spotting, creativity and self-motivation, all of which are key to enterprise education. The literature on changing career structures and the shift away from structural career progression towards more fluid models involving a greater diversity of work modes (Holmes and Cartwright, 1994) is also of relevance. It is within this wider context of portfolio careers that graduates may consider enterprise at some stage. From a broader perspective on youth transitions, Kelly (2006) presents the concept of the “entrepreneurial self”, a form of selfhood extending across and beyond the sphere of work, that he suggests has “come to dominate the horizons of identity” in neo liberal Western democracies (p17).

Whether viewed as integral to the fabric of modern Western self-identity, or at a more applied level where enterprising skills and attributes are transferable - even fundamental - to successful employment, it is clear that the value and need for enterprising behaviour extends well beyond starting and operating a business. This point is becoming quite well established - at least within the field of enterprise education - and is central to our paper (Rae and Woodier, 2006; Gibb, 2010, Wilson, 2012). The second important theme relates to the potential for more engagement between HEIs and businesses to generate cultural change and provide opportunities for students. Specifically, the Wilson Review (Wilson, 2012) argues for the repositioning of careers support to work more effectively with businesses to promote graduate career choices. Clearly, given our arguments above, this relates equally to graduates aspiring to enter business and those aspiring to enter work (Wilson, 2012). The third theme, and where we think our contribution may be greatest given the apparent lack of literature in this area relates to the timeliness of support for graduating students, specifically, the need for support following graduation. This focus emerged primarily from our KE ‘conversation’ in the run up to our conference and during the ‘student journey’ conference session. One observation of ours, based on recently completed PhD field-work was that graduates often hadn’t been aware of
either careers or enterprise support during their degree programmes. Where they had been aware of it they had tended not to think it was important or relevant to them personally. However, some time later, many of these graduates reached a crisis point, having left the relatively supportive institutional environment and felt alone, unsure of how to proceed\(^1\) (Beaven, 2013). With this insight from the field, we were able to see clearly the value of our programmes which both offer enterprise and employability support beyond graduation and seek to raise awareness of provision and to improve engagement with available support.

The following section provides an overview of enterprise and employability support for students at MMU available after graduation.

**Enterprise and employability provision**

MMU has placed Enterprise at the core of the university vision and mission and the MMU Corporate Plan 2012 to 2017 includes creativity and enterprise as a core value. The Plan’s vision is for the university to be an enterprising organisation with enterprising staff and students in recognition that this is integral to MMU’s contribution to the economic prosperity of the regional and national economy (MMU, 2012). This commitment is echoed in the academic enterprise strategy. In addition, the university aims to increase opportunities for knowledge transfer between staff and students through enterprise related activities. The following paragraphs provide an overview of two regional EU funded programmes delivered within MMU by the Centre for Enterprise.

**Enterprise Champions**

**Approach**

MMU has been a delivery partner in both Phase I and Phase II of the ERDF funded North West HE Enterprise Champions project and has had an Enterprise Champion since 2008. The MMU Enterprise Champion also sits on the regional Enterprise Champions programme board. The strategic aim of the programme is to increase levels of early stage entrepreneurial activity among students and graduates and build capacity for entrepreneurship support across North West HEIs. The majority of support is on an extra-curricular basis with activities promoted to students, staff and alumni of MMU. A key feature of the programme is that it provides support to individuals at any stage of their entrepreneurial journey. To be eligible beneficiaries must be resident within the North West of England and either be at university or be a graduate. There is no time limit to participation in the programme. The type of support on offer is varied and includes idea generation workshops, 121

\(^1\) This material was not included in the thesis but was collected during interviews carried out as part of the doctoral research.
business mentoring sessions, an annual enterprise conference over two days called New Directions, Boot Camps, and Going Freelance, a short course to support those considering self-employment.

**Results**

During phase 2 of the programme, the MMU Enterprise Champions team provided assistance to 161 pre start beneficiaries (exceeding their target by 25%) leading to 33 new businesses and 38 new jobs. Two case studies from the programme are provided below and demonstrate how combined interventions initiated after graduation have led to new businesses.

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**Laserlea** www.laserlea.com

Laserlea is a laser cutting & engraving lab based in Manchester city centre. They provide a high quality and affordable service for creative businesses and students.

Founder and manager, Cailline Lea, is a former MMU Art and Design student who spent a number of years in employment post-graduation. In 2010, Cailline started to develop two business ideas, the first around jewellery design and the second around laser printing. In 2011, she participated in MMU’s Enterprise Academy programme, benefitting from the intensive support provided by the MMU Enterprise Champion team. The Enterprise Academy is a five week programme that enables pre-start businesses to develop five key enterprise skills; Innovation; Pitching; Leadership; Action and Negotiation. Following the Academy, Cailline accepted the offer of a business mentor provided by the Enterprise Champion team. The mentor and mentee then worked together over a period of six months to unpack issues and to overcome hurdles.

As a result of this support, both business ventures were officially launched in early 2012 and both continue to run today. Premises for the laser cutting business have been secured in close proximity to both Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester. This has allowed the business to take full advantage of the surrounding population and to become the main priority and source of income for Cailline.

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**Itroubleshooter** www.itroubleshooter.co.uk

Shehbaz Afzal

Itroubleshooter is an IT consultancy for small businesses. Working closely with small and start-up businesses, Itroubleshooter delivers IT services and projects on time and within budget without compromising on quality. Director Shehbaz Afzal is an MMU graduate who found himself extremely frustrated working for other people after he graduated. Recognising that he eventually wanted to set up his own business, Shehbaz spent a number of years employed within the field of IT in order to develop his technical skills and to increase his industry knowledge. When he made the decision to hand in his notice and to develop his own business, Shehbaz contacted Innospace, MMUs incubation unit. Shehbaz took out a tenancy within Innospace in 2010 and took advantage of the extensive support that was offered to him. This came in the form of information sharing sessions, skills workshops and networking sessions. Shehbaz also accepted the offer of linking up with a business mentor from the Enterprise Champions project. Itroubleshooter was successfully launched and continues to trade. Shehbaz continues to meet with his business mentor and is currently developing two new business ventures.
**Graduate Employability project**

The North West Graduate Employability Programme represented a partnership between eight North West universities and was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) via its Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming (ITM) strand. The ITM strand necessitated work in three areas: ‘Innovation’, ‘Transnational’ and ‘Mainstreaming’. Overall, the partnership provided funding to match the £2,650,000 from the ESF. Across the project the university staff involved were careers and employability professionals with extensive knowledge and expertise, yet many had never delivered activities explicitly designed for unemployed graduates. CfE lead this project at MMU, working in partnership with the Careers and Employability Service. Support was provided for three years following graduation and focused on engagement to increase uptake of support following graduation – often seen by graduates as the end of their relationship with the university.

Being within an enterprise centre placed the them in a strong position to engage with employers and to bring out the employer voice, for example through an employer forum to which representatives from businesses were invited. The forum identified that the confidence of graduates, as opposed to technical skills and attainment of a degree, was crucially important to employers. Following this an innovative Employer Café was developed, which supported the students through developing networking skills allowing them to talk to employers on a one-to-one ‘speed dating’ basis. This forced a conversational situation, rather than the traditional interview format. Graduate to Work was a two day workshop aimed specifically at unemployed graduates designed to develop soft skills and included interview practice, confidence boosting, networking skills and application and CV clinics.

**Results**

The ESF project evaluation highlights the need for active engagement with students and graduates to promote the support available: survey responses indicate that 72% of participants were not aware of employability provision whilst they were at university (Goodwin, 2013). This comment from a member of staff who was involved in the ESF project illuminates this point further:

> “Working with graduates is something that is really important and I don’t think it’s something that’s specifically been done before … unemployed graduates tend to consider the relationship between them and the university as concluded …and there is the lack of awareness of the support available post-graduation”

Evaluation data is not available at the institution level but responses to the evaluation survey suggest that most found the support they received worthwhile. The survey was administered online and
completed by 285 ESF participants amounting to an 18% response rate. Of those that responded, 91% found their activity useful, 92% would recommend it to others and 97% believed the activity should be offered to all students. One graduate reflecting on the MMU employer café commented that “I have been to quite a few graduate events this year and I have to say the café we attended yesterday was the best one out of the lot”. These reflections from participants in the project at MMU are helpful to illustrate the value of support to develop softer skills and also the need for timely intervention.

“As a recent graduate, you often think that you know how to job search, but this course opened my eyes to so many ways of getting into employment”

“I had taken a non-graduate level administration role to pay the bills and was disheartened by the economic climate, lack of jobs and lack of responses to the 50-100 applications I was sending out each week… After completing the programme I completed several successful interviews and was offered more than one job but felt in a good position to hold out for my ideal opportunity. Within 12 weeks of completing the programme I had secured a temporary role at Manchester United and throughout my time here I have continued to utilise the skills I learnt; being made permanent staff after 3 months, followed by a promotion in January”.

Employers also valued in relation to the type of support provided and contrasted it to careers fairs, one of the more typical ways in which universities broker a relationship between graduating students and potential employers :

“1 in 400 [students] at careers fairs take the initiative, and show that they have the right traits to get a job”

“I’d rather [spend a whole day in the university speaking to students] than spend £600 on a careers fair”

To date, elements of the project that have been mainstreamed include the Employer Forum, Employer Café, Graduate to Work, recorded mock interviews and various documents and materials that were developed to support beneficiaries through the project.
Implications

The paper has described a KE project within a university has explained how this paper arose from that process. In doing so we have provided a brief overview of relevant literature and discussed the rationale for providing a more holistic model of support for students and graduates in relation to career development. We envisage a model that does not treat entrepreneurship and employment as necessarily separate career choices and have also reinforced the value of engaging with employers to develop graduate career options. An important point within the paper relates to the timeliness of support for students and graduates and we emphasise the need to also focus on the years after graduation, particularly in view of changing work patterns where people may need help to change career path many years after finishing their degree.

We have highlighted practice relating to two programmes, one focused on employability the other on entrepreneurship. The imminent end of these programmes provides an opportunity combine these foci as we look to mainstream good practice and we are well placed within the university to do so and envisage a role working with the Careers Service on aligning mainstream careers and enterprise support.

Externally funded projects enable change across the “business as usual” silos of university work. The ESF funded Graduate Employability Support Project allowed us to have a working relationship with the Careers and Employability Service. This is unusual, as our focus tends to be on business and the careers service main focus is on students and allowed us to share how the Centre for Enterprise works with Careers and vice versa. Hence our most successful elements of the project at MMU were working with employers, to develop the Employer Forum, which was unprecedented as far as the employers were concerned. A further strength if the ESF project was collaboration between partner HEIs who would typically be in competition. At a recent seminar for universities the issue of employability and enterprise not being aligned were frequently raised and stimulated discussion around lobby for alignment of funding around these areas.

There are also further implications for our research as we plan to expand and continue our current research that looks at the journey from student to entrepreneur and this will be shaped by the collaboration and discussion informing this paper. Specifically we anticipate an even stronger focus on those cases where a business start was not forthcoming and on the value of support received in the months and years after graduation.
**Value**

The paper has discussed and reinforced the need for a new and more holistic model of enterprise education and has suggested some opportunities to implement change within our university as our enterprise support projects are mainstreamed. We have also suggested ways in which wider influence on policy and practice across the UK may be possible. While this advances an aspiration that is gaining a stronger voice an original aspect of our work relates to the timeliness of graduate support and specifically the need to continue support long after the formal relationship with the university ends.

Some key aspects of good practice are:

- Provision of enterprise and employability support post-graduation and - importantly - raising awareness of these support opportunities; and
- Involving employers in employability activities to bring their needs to the fore and provide informal opportunities for networking.

Our location within an enterprise centre made employer engagement relatively straightforward but others could consider partnering with centres or departments who work closely with businesses to facilitate employer engagement.

A final point relates to our early discussions about developing a closer relationship between enterprise education and employability support. We do not underestimate the challenge of embedding enterprise support within careers services but our funded projects provide an opportunity to innovate and we hope to effect incremental change as we learn what works well.
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