

making the case

Swansea Employability Award

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Theme(s)

Learning: Employability

The background context

Employability skills and awareness are vital for our students; more vital is that they recognise these in themselves and can articulate experiences using skills to an employer.

At Swansea we piloted an Employability Skills Award (ESA) two years ago with some success. The ESA had three themes with a Careers Adviser taking responsibility for one employability theme each. The program was designed to be mainly class taught using a PebblePad webfolio for students to compile work for assessment. This worked well, but the numbers of students who could attend was limited to around 90.

The university administration decided that we should offer an employability award to all students, but there was only funding for one person to develop and coordinate the program.

Why PebblePad?

PebblePad has tools to support learning, in particular reflective learning, and also has all of the system design requirements needed for implementing this project. It is all online, secure, easy to manage very large numbers of students, easy for students to use, easy to give students feedback, and easy to gather statistics for the management to ponder. The University was already using PebblePad so there was no additional cost associated with its setup and use for this project. I could implement it all myself without having to rely on others, which has the potential to slow the whole thing down or delay it. I was able to have it up and running and tested inside two months, in time for the start of the new academic year.

The purpose

The Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) showed Swansea in a poor light in relation to employability with some subjects having very low employability statistics. There was concern that prospective student numbers might drop. There was also an increasing sense of responsibility towards the students regarding their employability and not just on academic experience alone.

We wanted to offer all students the chance to participate in an employability award that, if completed, would be included on the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). This would be the added incentive.

By taking part in the award students are required to reflect on experiences they have had, and on the skills they have learnt and developed. They participate in a careers interview and a mock job interview, and then reflect on what they have learnt in each and identify further actions they need to take.

The approach

I was asked by the PVC for the Student Experience if I could create an employability award that was student driven and almost exclusively online. It was to be run by me alone and to be available by the start of the new academic year, only 2 months away.

I accepted the challenge and from 1st August set about designing the award, drawing on experience from the previous ESA pilot. With the 'program design' agreed, I created a 'system design', i.e. detail on how the award would be implemented, how students would be able to do it, etc. I was not aware of an existing model, so it had to be designed and implemented from scratch (Cardew, 2011).

The Swansea Employability Award (SEA) is fully online. There are two main modules to the SEA following registration. The first module involves finding out more about yourself: what you value in life, your personality type, your learning styles, what jobs might suit you; and then marketing yourself by creating a CV and covering letter. The module finishes with an interview with a Careers Adviser.

The second module is about gaining experiences. These experiences may follow on from the first module and can include work experiences, volunteering, positions of responsibility, and so on. The second module finishes with a mock job interview.

For each element of the two modules participants need to record their experiences and thoughts in relation to their career. PebblePad forms are used to scaffold this reflection and these are saved to a gateway for Personal Tutors (PTs) to access when necessary. The PTs are then asked to verify that the student did have the experiences that they reflected upon. The philosophy behind this is not that we don't trust the students, but that we feel that it will encourage PTs to spend more time with their students and also act as an introduction to PebblePad.

More information about the SEA is available at <http://www.sea.swan.ac.uk>.

The result

The SEA was launched in time for the new academic year 2011/12. The target was for 200 students to register within the year. By Feb 5, 2012, 230 students had registered, with 10 already having completed. The university marketing team were keen to have case studies early on and as a result interviewed the first two who completed the award: <http://bit.ly/pb201201>

To maintain the philosophy of the SEA which is to keep it open to any student, over 40 interviewers have been recruited from staff across campus. These are people who are trained and experienced in interviewing in their particular field and have offered their services to the SEA to be mock job interviewers. The mock interview is at the end of the SEA and is driven by the student who books an interview when they are ready and the interviewer allocated for that day will interview them. The interviews are generic, i.e. not job specific, so there is no need to collect information about the student or to get them to apply for a fictitious job vacancy. The questions are geared strongly towards skills used and developed during interviews as this is a key area that employers say is missing when they interview graduates.

At the annual Careers Fair a sponsorship proposal was presented to many of the organisations attending. As a result, one very high profile employer is keen to be a sponsor, not only providing some much need funding for marketing, but also offering skills sessions linking to the SEA.

The impact

The impact for the student population will not be evident until students graduate and we monitor the DLHE, comparing those students who completed the SEA to those that have graduate work.

The impact for me was that I very quickly got to know many people across campus from academics, to marketing, to the registry; raising the profile of Careers and Employability in the process.

Lessons learnt

- Have the confidence to do something unique that can make a difference to each student.
- Gaining any kind of technical support is difficult. PebblePad enables you to do this kind of thing without the need for any IT assistance from others.
- It is important to make it as easy as possible for the students to use the interface to the award.
- I would concentrate more on upfront design of program and then design of the process, including in detail which PebblePad tools to use. This link is to a 'reflection' on how I am helping others to implement awards within the university: <http://bit.ly/pb201202>
This talks a lot about design and not so much about PebblePad, but it is a reminder that PebblePad is a box of tools to support learning and teaching. I am often asked by academic members of staff to demonstrate PebblePad to students, which to me is a futile task. It is a bit like showing someone a plumber's toolkit, one person might have a look inside, pick up a tool and think what on earth can I do with this? Someone else might say to themselves, 'Maybe I can use this to undo a tap that needs fixing'. Yet another person will go and read a manual on plumbing and then be happy to use most of the tools with an understanding of their use and what they have been designed for. Most students do not bother when left to their own devices. **Staff need to take the lead always.**
- Ideally I would like to have more contact with students and get them to create webfolios to reflect on experiences, involve Personal Tutors more, and even embed it into the curriculum. The latter is already happening in some subject areas.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- I was able to offer the employability award to **ALL** students.
- Employability is a 'learning orientation' – a student cannot simply pass an exam and say they are now employable. Unfortunately, for the majority of students education is a 'grade orientation' (the opposite of a learning orientation). The culture is about passing exams, and in many cases the bare minimum needed. Learning orientation is about continuous and deep learning, and reflecting on learning underpins this. PebblePad tools support this learning in a unique and effective way.
- No paper – it is sustainable.
- Excellent support from the PebblePad people when needed.
- So easy to use – I like it so much I used a webfolio to track everything that I have done since the start of the project: <http://bit.ly/pb201203>

References:

PebblePad asset, Chris Cardew, 2011. *How the SEA works diagram* [Online] (Updated 23 September 2011). Available at: <http://pebblepad.swan.ac.uk/viewasset.aspx?oid=76499&type=file> [Accessed 08 May 2012].