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Title: Enhancing students' employability skills using industry guest lectures: a collaborative teaching approach

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Introduction:

As Suleman (2017) observes, an increasing amount of scientific literature reflects that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are under strong pressure to produce 'work-ready' graduates. Not surprisingly, as Spence and Hyams-Ssekasi (2015) mention, growing numbers of HEIs include employability orientation in their corporate strategy and performance measures. Hence, "universities are increasingly moving away from the tradition of mainly producing and transmitting academic knowledge and are putting emphasis on skills development for employability" (Maclean and Pavlova 2011: 321). In a similar vein, the *embedded employability* pillar of the Coventry University Group Education Strategy (2015-2021) focuses on equipping students with necessary competences to thrive in an increasingly competitive graduate job market climate. Considering such goals, this case study explores the effectiveness of lectures developed and delivered jointly with industry guest speakers, thereby enhancing the students' applied knowledge and skills relevant to logistics and supply chain management fields. This teaching method was applied to the final year undergraduate students on Semester 2 of the academic year 2017-2018.

Aims and rationale:

The 'Global Logistics Management' module evaluation questionnaire (MEQs) in 2016-17, along with informal surveys by the module leader, revealed that students valued having up-to-date examples from logistics and supply chain business practices during their lectures. They also expressed a great interest in complementing the lectures with invited industry guest speakers. The author (being the module leader, lecturer and seminar tutor) rationalised such requests from the students with the Coventry University Group Education Strategy (2015-2021) in which some of the core statements related with *embedded employability* are presented in Table 1. As can be implied from this table, embracing the real-world professional requirements and experiences in the Higher Education teaching and learning practices is considered plausible for developing employable graduates:

"Collaboration and partnership with employers imply a shared responsibility for our students. This can be achieved through continuous engagement throughout the student and course lifecycles" (p. 5).
"A key component of experiential learning across many professions is the inclusion of practice education. Course teams can support students to extend their knowledge, skills, experience and attitudes through professional practice" (p. 5).
"Our [Coventry University] students can expect: (...) Embedded employability skills and 'real world' opportunities" (p. 14).
"Our staff will be expected to: (...)
"Remain up to date with current professional practice (...)
Engage with local, international and professional communities to enhance teaching" (p. 14).

Table 1. Coventry University Group Education Strategy (2015-2021) statements related to *embedded employability*.

For HEIs to enhance student employability, Helyer and Lee (2014) suggest arranging placements and internships for students. However, Coventry University aims to "fully utilise professional experts to support student education and provide different and exciting collaborations and opportunities beyond placement and internships" (Coventry University Group Education Strategy 2015-2021: 5). Therefore, the module leader followed the suggestion of Van Hoek, Godsell and Harrison (2011) that industry guest lectures can be an effective mechanism for supply chain discipline related students to capture useful industry insights and practical job-related realities.

To avoid irrelevance of guest lectures to learning outcomes of the module and maintain academic rigour of the classes, the author decided to collaboratively prepare and co-deliver lectures with the relevant guest lecturers for three sessions. This warranted the natural accommodation of knowledge exchange between practice and theory for the benefits of students' employability (Van Hoek et al. 2011). This method of lecture co-delivery was to enhance students' employability qualities. Besides that, this case study contributes to filling the gap noted by Minocha, Hristov and Reynolds (2017: 235) that "the employer-university interaction theme in the literature is not sufficiently addressed in UK Higher Education practice".

In light of the above, the aim of the collaborative lecture preparations and co-deliveries by industry guest speakers and the academic was to contribute to the students' employability related learning experiences and outcomes. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

- Expose students to the latest developments in industry practices and applicability of theory in those through applied case studies and real business problem-solving
- Richness of knowledge through gaining multiple views and developing critical acumen of the subject by triangulated discussions of a subject topic among guest lecturer, the academic and the students;
- Students gaining interest in the subject and towards learning by better understanding practical value of their studies through the collaborative lectures;
- Making students 'business ready' so they are able to solve complex real-world problems;
- Students gaining improved awareness about various job roles, complexities associated with securing those and the ways of achieving excellent on-the-job performance.

The applied collaboration focused on the suggestion of Rufai, Rahim Bin and Abdullah Bin Mat (2015: 42) that a target for the teaching would be, "... work-based and skill experience oriented, that can encourage students in Higher Education to think about work place learning more explicitly and reflectively, that will in turn help them to develop a broad range of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, each of which ultimately contribute in some manner to graduate employability".

Implementation:

In the first instance, the topics for the collaborative lectures were selected based on several factors. First, the author referred to the Module Information Directory (MID) and selected topics from the indicative contents. He then discussed these with the students, academic colleagues teaching logistics and supply chain management, the employment tutor, management members of related courses and business practitioners. Once topics were chosen, the module leader began searching for competent potential guest lecturers with the willingness to support the co-lecturing initiative in the targeted topics. To bring a variety of perspectives (see Van Hoek et al. 2011), the following UK-based guest lecturers joined the initiative:

- Senior manager at a multinational logistics provider company (MLPC);
- Mid-level manager (who was also Coventry University postgraduate student) working for a publishing institution with global logistics and supply chain operations (PIGLSCO);
- Entry-level manager (who was also Coventry University former student) employed at a multinational logistics provider and retailer company (MLPRC).

Despite their busy schedule, the industry professionals committed time and effort to undertake this collaborative endeavour between academia and industry. The author collaborated with each of the guest lecturers, sharing with them the learning outcomes of each lecture, as well as the interests and general level of expertise of the students. The co-delivery session contents and plans were negotiated. While the lecturer focused on covering theoretical and some practical aspects of the topic, each of the guest lecturers prepared recent and ongoing business examples from their company practices and complementary employability advices. After the presentation slides were ready, these were shared with the students several days before corresponding sessions. Using a flipped learning approach (e.g., see Bechter and Swierczek 2017), the students were asked to familiarise themselves with the contents and pose questions related to the topics in preparation for the sessions.

The lecture co-delivery focused on interchangeable speaking and discussions by the lecturer and the guest lecturer on the related topics. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussions with the lecturer, guest lecturer and each other. Each of the sessions were finalised by collecting qualitative and quantitative questionnaires from the students. Notably, the session with MLPC was attended by the Coventry University School of Strategy and Leadership (SSL) colleague, as well as 2 postgraduate students on a related module (Transportation and Distribution Management). The feedback from these additional attendees were also collected. The author has analysed the feedback from the corresponding participants with the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness and potential improvement areas of this innovative addition to teaching. Furthermore, qualitative feedback from Global Logistics Management Module Evaluation Questionnaire on the corresponding cohort (semester 2 of 2017-2018) was also analysed to draw additional insights for the same purpose.

Feedback:

The feedback from the participating students on the collaborative lectures were collected by questionnaire, which included both quantitative and qualitative questions. These demonstrated that the learning outcomes were best achieved by co-delivering lectures with alumni and senior manager speakers. In line with quantitative feedback, the qualitative feedback (see examples in Table 2) also demonstrated that the students found these collaborative sessions engaging, as well as beneficial for enhancing their theoretical and applied knowledge, interest in the session contents, and employability. In a similar vein, the attending postgraduate students at the collaborative session with the MLPC guest lecturer assessed the session as “very dynamic, interactive and interesting...” with the “diversity of theories and practical examples, engagement and enthusiasm of the speakers...”.

In addition, 68% of students listed collaborative lectures amongst the top three ‘good things’ in the module. This further justifies the desirability of utilising this approach in module teaching. Likewise, a senior lecturer who observed the collaborative lecture delivery with MLPC, commented: “This is a very useful approach to teaching as it brings up-to-date industry experience and employability skills to the students. It also will allow staff to understand industry needs better and adapt the curriculum and teaching activities accordingly”.

MLPRC	“Great real-life business examples on MLPRC were provided”. “Listening to someone with current experience makes learning interesting and engaging”.
MLPC	“Amount of knowledge, experience and enthusiasm of the lecturer and the MLPC guest lecturer, with interesting delivery and cooperation between them”. “Understanding the challenges in the industry and solutions on real-life examples”. “Really positive and engaging guest speaker; great mix of theory and practice from the collaborative lecture”. “Learning about employment opportunities and helpful hints when applying for logistics jobs”.
PIGLSCO	“Understanding logistics and supply chain management KPIs from theoretical and practical viewpoints in great details”. “Going back and forth between each lecturer was good”. “Mix of theory and applications”. “Gives more knowledge than in ordinary lectures”.

Table 2. Example qualitative feedback by module students

Despite the overall positive feedback on the tested method of teaching, of the five per cent of students who did not find the collaborative lecture with MLPRC interesting could also indicate student preferences in terms of learning styles. Therefore, the tested lecture co-delivery should not be the only method of teaching. Furthermore, the qualitative feedback showed some areas for improvements which the collaborative sessions could benefit from. The ones mentioned by students could be summarised into following:

- Better student engagement would be desired;
- Too much content to cover during a 2-hour lecture;
- Sufficient time needs to be allowed after the session for questions and answers, as well as networking with the guest lecturer.

Therefore, improving the methods of student engagement, while slightly reducing the volume of content and session delivery time, would allow for more face-to-face interaction with the guest lecturers.

Strengths and weaknesses:

The collaborative lectures effectively contributed to the intent of giving students both academic rigour and practical applicability. Merging the expertise from both contemporary business practice and theoretical perspectives increased the relevance of the sessions for the learners. Moreover, the co-involvement of the lecturer during the sessions allowed those to be more student-centric and meet the intended learning outcomes. Having guest lecturers from different organisations met the students’ diverse career goals and learning interests. In addition, this gave students direct in-depth practical insights from the industry in the classroom.

As an innovative method of teaching, it bore some risk that it may not effectively capture the interest of all the students and this requires careful preparation. Organising and holding such sessions requires time for planning, preparation and delivery. Also, compared with the lecture led only by the academic, the involvement of the industry practitioners with corresponding teaching materials resulted into too much lecture content and decreased control on the pace of the class activities and progress.

Despite its overall effectiveness, the collaborative lecture delivery performance could benefit by following actions:

1. Involve the same industry speakers in forthcoming academic years to reduce the required time and effort for preparation;
2. Continue integrating previously collected feedback from students on the collaborative lectures, as well as rehearse with the industry guest lecturers in advance with a few students for additional feedback;
3. Survey industry guest lecturers after the sessions to capture areas for further development from the practitioners' point of view.

Positive outcomes:

The collaborative lectures can be seen to be an effective mechanism in enhancing the employability of students through knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. From collected feedback and personal observation by the author, it is apparent that this method brings numerous advantages to the students, as listed in Table 3. In addition, it can be replicated in other academic modules as well, especially if the above-mentioned limitations are addressed and the recommendations implemented.

Exposure to important live information in class;
Opportunity to do active research about industry practices on the spot;
Better equip students to effectively apply theory to business practices;
Through learning from industry leaders, students can be better inspired to study harder for a successful career;
Understanding multiple job roles, related tasks and working processes in a business industry;
Expanding knowledge about graduate career opportunities and tips;
Provoke students' attention and engagement by offering a contrast to other teaching methods;
Provide possibilities to develop the students' professional networks;
Show how companies care about this (Corporate Social Responsibility), thus inspiring the students to be responsible graduates and leaders.

Table 3. Positive outcomes of collaborative teaching for students

To sum up, as the observations and feedback on collaborative lecture delivery demonstrates, students find this engaging, informative and inspiring for their learning and development of employability skills. Interaction and knowledge exchange with industry guest lecturers can advance an academic's capacity to keep up-to-date with industrial developments, suitability of theory to business practice, and employability trends and skill requirements on the job market (Rufai et al. 2015).

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