

Students as Agents for Change in Learning and Teaching

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Case study 10 – Theology: Employability

Introduction

This project was prompted by a concern raised by students, in that they struggled to identify career paths and found it difficult to apply skills learnt in Theology to careers not directly linked to this subject. The SSLC chair found that students showed a lack of confidence pin-pointing the skills they had learnt from their Theology degree, and suggested that students were too often directed to a small selection of careers options. It was felt that students needed more guidance with regards to applying their degree to broad areas of employment. To help the department to develop a more tailored service, a project was devised in order to capture data about the career aspirations of students studying Theology at Exeter and the career advice students were currently receiving. The overall goal was to help the department enable students to recognise that they are competitive in the graduate field and should feel confident applying for jobs in a wide range of sectors.

Methods of data collection

Project data was collected in two different ways:

- A questionnaire to all Theology students (13 Year 1, 25 Year 2, 18 Year 3 and 1 Year 4, to give a total of 57 students)
- Interviews with two Theology students (Year 1 and Year 3).

Analysis of data

Questionnaire

The majority of students (83%) thought their degrees would prepare them for future employment. However, under half thought their degree made them competitive in the graduate job market (this was lower in first year and third year of study - 38 and 39% respectively). In addition, 42% of students believed that their degree subject limited their career aspirations.

When given a list of skills in three categories (Management of Self, of Others and of Information), it was evident that there were some areas where the majority of students felt they were well equipped through their degree, but other areas where there was less confidence shown. The most academic-related skills were all highly supported, whereas aspect of teamwork, the ability to identify skills in relation to job and career opportunities and the ability to present oneself effectively in CVs, applications and interviews scored far less well.

Management of Self		Management of Others		Management of Information	
Analyse text	93	Defend/justify views or actions	91	Use appropriate sources of information (library, retrieval systems, people)	93
Take responsibility for your own learning	90	Act in a professional / ethical manner	84	Use information critically	93
Listen actively and with purpose	90	Respect the views and values of others	83	Use information to support an argument/ course of action	90
Show intellectual flexibility	86	Cooperate with others, adapting to the needs of	77	Respond to different purposes/context/ audiences	80

Set objectives, priorities and standards	82	the group/team		Use ICT appropriately to manage, record and present information	75
Deal with constructive criticism	81	Give constructive feedback	68	Demonstrate understanding of the research process	75
Synthesis of ideas	80	Take initiative and lead others	61	Use information in innovative and creative ways	74
Use learning in new or different situations/ contexts	79	Negotiate with individuals/groups in order to manage conflict	61	Interpret a variety of information forms	70
Identify own strengths and weaknesses	75	Assist/support others in a learning activity	61	Develop strategies for handling data/information	56
Plan/work towards long-term aims and goals	69	Evaluate the effectiveness of group/team activities	40		
Clarify personal values	67				
Cope with stress	60				
Identify own skills in relation to job/career opportunities	46				
Present oneself effectively in CVs, applications and interviews	32				

Table 1: Skills students feel they are gaining/have gained through their Theology degree

Students were also asked to tick the areas in which they were considering careers. Below is a table listing the careers selected, in order of most popular to least popular:

Careers		%	
1. Education	63	13. Legal profession	14
2. Charity and voluntary work	50	14. Hospitality and events management	13
3. Social care and guidance work	45	15. Financial management/ accountancy	11
4. Advertising, marketing and PR	27	16. Information technology	9
5. Publishing and journalism	25	17. Management and statistics	7
6. Media and broadcasting	23	18. Health care	7
7. Creative arts and design	21	19. Information services	5
8. Retailing, buying and selling	20	20. Administration	5
9. Law enforcement and protection	18	21. Scientific services	4
10. Human resources/ employment	16	22. Transport, logistics and distribution	2
11. Performing arts	16	23. Insurance and pensions	0
12. Leisure, sport and tourism	14		

Table 2: Employment areas students are considering/would consider going into

The three main areas of interest for career paths are education, charity and voluntary work and social care and guidance work. These are career paths that are most often mentioned by careers advisors as areas that Theology students tend to go into and that are most relevant to them. However what is interesting about the data above is the wide range of other career areas that students are considering, from advertising and marketing, publishing, media and performance, arts, retail, law, and so on.

Three quarters of students use the Careers and Employment Service, a third talk to their Personal tutor about careers advice, and one in ten talk to another member of academic staff. Two thirds of students think their personal tutor should be equipped to give some form of career advice. Overall two thirds of students are satisfied with the career advice available to them but about the same number felt there was a need for improvement in some areas. A suggestion made to the SSLC had been a website dedicated to Theology students' employability and a large majority responded that they would find this useful (93%). Information that students considered the website could include are listed below.

Employability website for Theology students	%
<i>Employability case studies of Theology alumni</i>	67
<i>Information about conversion courses</i>	75
<i>Information about how to identify own skills in relation to job/career opportunities</i>	74

Table 3: What students would like included in a Theology employability website

Students commented as follows:

- *'Have previous students write a paragraph or two about what they did when they graduated and their experiences of employment and if it is related to theology.'*
- *'Website, specific 1 to 1 conversations/tutorials to talk about options, speakers/fairs?'*
- *'A lot of careers advisors put emphasis on a theology degree leading to social work - need more information on other career opportunities (possibly obscure employers).'*
- *'Making people aware of the options available.'*

An indication that students are not necessarily aware of how they can develop their degree skills is the lack of engagement with the Exeter Award. Nine in ten students stated they were not engaged, and of the students who could potentially become engaged in the coming years, fewer than 1 in ten first and second year students planned to do so.

Interview with students

An interview was conducted with two volunteer Theology students, a first year and a final year student. Both had always been interested in Theology and wanted the chance to learn more. Neither student necessarily thought they would use Theology directly in their careers, but both wanted to study to graduate level and had chosen Theology because it was of interest to them.

Skills They considered they were gaining valuable skills including the ability to study independently, learn Hebrew, analyse and critique text as well as presentati skills. Both thought that they were developing the majority of the skills shown to them on the skills list (as used within the questionnaire). They thought that it would be difficult to come up with the skills descriptors themselves and to talk to employers about the skills, and both appreciated that the list would be a useful resource to have when they started thinking about employment. Although each module had a module sheet with aims, objectives and skills, these descriptors were not as explicit as the list given to them. Students did not feel that anyone in the department specifically discussed skills they were gaining. End of year discussions were considered useful by one student because it made her reflect on what she had achieved. The other student thought her tutor might have helped her reflect, but she had not asked for this and had less experience of it. Neither student had used ePDP or been introduced to ePDP by their personal tutors.

Employability Both students felt quite confident about their employability. However, they considered that Theology degrees were often thought about too narrowly and were often linked with working for the church or as a Religious Studies teacher and it was hard to think of different career paths. One student said one of her friends went to events put on by the careers and employment service and that she was more aware of different career options. Students felt if they wanted to do something different they had to look into different options. Both students considered a Theology degree to be as competitive in the job market as other subject areas. The third year student was planning on becoming a maths teacher and had worked with children through the church and had taken part in the Student Associates scheme to gain experience in schools. She felt that if you knew what you wanted to do there were ways of gaining experiences in those areas. The first year student wanted to use her Hebrew and knowledge of ancient history in a career. She attended extra lectures put on by the department in the evenings and received support from a lecturer who had experience in the field. However, neither was engaged with the Exeter Award. Both thought it might be useful. The students said they had not been told about the award by members of the Theology department but had received emails from the Careers and Employment service. Neither had considered the Work Experience module, one because she had a job and one because there were many other modules she wanted to do.

The first year student felt that the skills she was gaining were quite unique and she felt she had already learnt a lot which would be relevant to the job she wanted to do. She felt that because she knew more or less what area she wanted to go in it helped her to focus her studies in that area and she was becoming involved outside lectures too. The third year student knew that once she had completed the qualifications needed to become a teacher, she would be confident applying for jobs. Neither felt disadvantaged by taking a Theology degree since they could convert their course if needed. However, they both recognised that, until they had

been forced to think about employability more broadly - through this project - different career options had not particularly been made apparent.

Improvements These two students thought it was a very good idea to have an employability website for Theology students, especially if it was run by someone who taught on a core module in the department because they would have a good idea of students' experiences and all the students would know them. It was thought that it would be useful to link some of the taught modules to ideas for careers and that this would aid students in thinking about what they would like to do. Both students felt that profiles of alumni including information such as how they got into the careers they were doing would be helpful. The students were asked if there was an academic they would suggest as a careers link person. In addition, a group of first years were setting up a Theology society and they felt that it would be a good way to link careers with Theology students directly, with speakers coming in to talk about their jobs.

Summary of Findings

The questionnaire outlined that students consider they possess a range of skills, from taking responsibility for their own learning, listening actively and with purpose and analysing text. The three kinds of skill that least students thought they possessed were evaluating the effectiveness of group/team activities, identifying own skills in relation to job/career opportunities and presenting oneself effectively in CVs, applications and interviews. The three most popular careers areas were education, charity and voluntary work and social care and guidance work. However there was a range of other careers students were interested in, including advertising, marketing and PR, publishing and journalism, media and broadcasting, creative arts and design and retail. Students did use the Careers and Employment Service, spoke to their personal tutor and other staff about careers, and most students were satisfied with the career advice available to them. However, they also felt that some improvements could be made to support them, specifically as Theology students.

Almost all (93%) students thought that a website dedicated to Theology students' employability would be useful, including employability case studies of Theology alumni, and information about conversion courses and how to identify their own skills in relation to job/career opportunities. Connecting module choices to possible career paths might also be useful. From the interview with students it was clear that they thought they were competitive in the jobs market, but none-the-less they found it difficult to link what they were learning to the list of skills provided. They considered this list a useful resource and would refer back to it in future. Neither student had used ePDP or was doing the Exeter Award. Both thought a careers website for Theology students managed in-house would be useful and thought that having a link member of staff in the department could ensure careers advice was more co-ordinated and tailored to Theology students. One of them was starting up a Theology society and thought that careers could be linked into this.

Recommendations/Solutions

In accordance with the data gathered, it is thought that an employability website should be developed which could include but not exclusively: career profiles of Theology alumni, links to information about conversion courses, skills lists, links to information about careers suited to Theology graduates, links between modules and career choices, information about employability events for Theology and relevant links to the central Careers and Employment website, including the Exeter Award.

It would be useful if an academic within the department were to lead on this and serve as a careers link officer. This person could then oversee the development of a careers webpage, co-ordinate with the careers service to set up sessions specifically for Theology students, work with the Theology society to arrange guest speakers, work with other departments in HuSS and become involved in the HuSS careers fair 2009/10. It is felt that Dr. Henry French who is currently the History careers link, would be a good point of contact and could be able to aid development of careers in Theology by sharing how it had been developed in the History department.

Finally it is felt that the inclusion of discussion about career development into personal tutorials would be useful. This would be mainly to sign-post students and to ensure that students are encouraged to think about the skills they are developing and careers they would like to pursue as early as possible. This would help students focus on their employability throughout their degrees. This might include introducing students to ePDP and the Exeter Award. Currently these are two resources available to students which the department does not actively promote and which would aid students' professional development.

*Study undertaken with Kim Layton
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July 2000*