

Strategic Consultancy Case Study

Institution

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)

Project title

Employability in the curriculum

Background/Context

The project aimed to provide an overarching assessment of how employability had been embedded into the curricula of nine Higher Education providers in Wales.

Spanning several months, this pan-Wales project sought to identify good practice in approaches to employability within learning and teaching activities.

Solution

At the core of the approach, Advance HE used two bespoke surveys to capture staff and student perceptions of core aspects of employability. This produced a robust benchmark across all institutions to help identify areas for focus with the aim of providing areas of further consideration, highlighting potential barriers, and identifying areas that might require further support in terms of embedding employability within the curriculum.

Nine institutions across Wales participated in the project, providing a total of 575 staff responses and more than 3,000 student responses.

Both surveys are rooted in the Advance HE Framework for Embedding Employability in Higher Education. Part of the Advance HE Framework Series for enhancing student success, the methodology has been developed and informed by research and evidence-based practice to identify core areas necessary for enhancing employability and provide a strategy for embedding employability within the curriculum.

The staff survey provided staff with an anonymous mechanism to report on employability within their course area through a range of agreement statements, ultimately providing an understanding of how well-embedded employability is within specific courses.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students were questioned about the ways in which their degree programmes had included aspects that directly tackled their career prospects, such as leadership and communication skills development, paid work opportunities and application preparation. The

study was particularly interested in students' awareness of how their courses developed their employability.

The findings were then analysed and assessed by Advance HE's consulting team, who produced a series of reporting outputs for HEFCW and the individual institutions, focusing on policy-based, strategic-level recommendations.

Outcomes

The project delivered the first whole-nation response that considers employability within the curricula.

Both surveys provided valid instruments through which to consider employability within the curriculum, although the two were not directly comparable. This, however, provided an opportunity to consider employability from two varying perspectives. If variation between staff perception and students' views was apparent, the institutions could consider these differences within their own context to understand the best course of action (if any) to enhance the provision.

There were 22 recommendations based upon Advance HE's findings. HEFCW and individual universities, each received an individual report of its own data, and were then able to consider if and where action was necessary.

Dr David Blaney, Chief Executive of HEFCW, said: "Our vision is to support the Welsh higher education sector to enable our graduates to develop the necessary skills and attributes to meet their career ambitions. One way institutions can do this is to ensure that employability is an integral part of the curriculum."

"This is why we commissioned Advance HE to delve deeper to ask students and staff whether they thought their own courses were contributing to their development in this way. This is the first time any UK nation has surveyed all its higher education providers to get this kind of detailed insight into employability."

"The report shines a light on – among other things – how staff and students associate work experience with employability, and how students would benefit from more opportunities. We already see that Welsh universities are increasing the range of work experience options for students. To complement the work going on, we are continuing to fund universities to provide tailored work experience and placement support through the Graduate Support Fund and the GO Wales successor programme."

"The report also shows that students are more easily able to pinpoint employability support in their curriculum when it takes the shape of work experience. This is helpful for institutions, who will be interested in how to better demonstrate to students how employability is built into the courses that they are taking."

"We are grateful to the team at Advance HE and the author Stuart Norton for identifying a wealth of areas which institutions could explore with our support. These include tailoring career support to the geographic location or labour market, supporting practitioners, engaging with alumni expertise, and designing flexible opportunities with students."

"We look forward to institutions continuing to develop what they offer to students, including through our employability support funding next year."