

# THE CONSORTIUM: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO EMPLOYABILITY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Employability is increasing in both importance and visibility in Higher Education due to its inclusion as a key metric in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), in which the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) returns consist of 2 of the 6 core TEF metrics. Furthermore increasing levels of student fees and subsequently student debt has placed a greater emphasis on value for money in Higher Education, which itself casts a light on employment and graduate salaries.

This paper explores a trial undertaken within an undergraduate Product Design sandwich course in the UK. On a sandwich course, students would typically be expected to secure an industrial placement with the assistance from the Universities employability team for the 3rd year of a 4-year degree. Whilst dedicated employability support is given to students to obtain a placement, some students can struggle despite their academic achievement to obtaining a placement. This is due to a lack of confidence and an inability to perform effectively in an interview context, and is especially acute in the context of growing student numbers and therefore greater competition. With such students in mind, an innovative collaboration was launched between three separate agencies to trial 'The Consortium' an in-house student run consultancy. 'The Consortium' was trialled with 3 cohorts of students over a 3 year period to give able students who struggled to obtain industrial placements an opportunity to gain experience of working for external clients and running their own business. The university provided space, business advice, oversight and networks, which the students were encouraged to use to bring in live design projects, which they would undertake as a group of 3-5 designers during their sandwich year.

*Keywords: Employability, Entrepreneurship, Design Education, industrial-placements, Consultancy*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This paper is written in the context of rising attention and importance being given to the outcomes of University study with an increasing awareness of the growing financial burden upon students on graduation. There is also a renewed focus on value for money from the Higher Education sector as the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that only 26% of current loans will be repaid in full [1]. With such considerations of the accumulation of student debt leading to a more intensive, focus on the employability of students [2]. This paper documents one of a number of innovations within the curriculum of the BSc Product Design course at Nottingham Trent University to raise the graduate prospects of students upon the course, a fuller discussion of which is published in a separate journal paper [3].

In the context of striving to improve the graduate prospects of students, attention turns to the placement provision offered through the sandwich year of the 4-year route of the course. Unsurprisingly students that obtain industrial placements on the course are more successful in gaining graduate roles [3], that reflect the characteristics and requirements of a positive 'Graduate Prospect' as defined within the DLHE survey. In the 2012-13 academic year, changes aimed at encouraging a greater uptake of placements were made to the course, which included directed teaching on professionalism, with the intention of increasing the percentage of students undertaking either an industrial placement or exchange semester during their sandwich year to as close to 100% as possible. Recognising that for some students, particularly international students, there is simply no desire to undertake the sandwich year. Such students typically register for or default after their 2<sup>nd</sup> year to the 3

year route of the course. The main aim of this intervention was to strive to ensure that all students who wanted to and had originally registered to undertake a sandwich year, were successful in enabling this to happen. This has been largely successful with data showing that the number of students undertaking an active sandwich year increased from 67% in 2012-13 to 90% in 2013-14 and 2014-15 [3]. However, with growing cohort sizes and increasing competition nationally, such an increase was neither easy, nor straight forward, and reflecting on and analysing student placement success. It became apparent to the author that there was not a direct correlation between academic attainment and success in achieving a placement in fact often the highest ability and most naturally talented students were amongst the last to be hired. This recognition led to an exploration of what could be done, for students that were academically good students but clearly lacked the confidence to secure placements. Inspired by a paper presentation on the Design Agency Project at Edinburgh College of the Art [4], the idea of the Consortium was settled on as a solution for unplaced students and was immediately acted upon, to organise a solution for that year's cohort.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Whilst Sharman and Patterson's paper [4], documented an experience for Graphic Design students in a vertical learning project, the central theme of students running their own consultancies was instrumental in the development of the Consortium. At Nottingham Trent University, we had a wealth of opportunities that could be exploited for the benefit of the students undertaking the 'Consortium' namely The Hive Centre for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship and the Future Factory. 'The Hive' is a business start-up incubator offering high quality business support and training to graduates and assistance with the development and establishment of new businesses. The 'Future Factory' was a European Regional Development Funding (EDRF) enterprise that offered support and services to local businesses. During this time a large amount of the work that was coming through the 'Future Factory' was largely design related and was becoming too time consuming for the academics involved. Therefore, the idea was to form a consultancy of design students on their sandwich year that could start by working on existing 'Future Factory' projects and build on this through networking to bring in their own design projects. The 'Consortium' was essentially a safe risk-free space within the University to engage in entrepreneurship and enterprise using the 'Hive' facilities and staff for the business support, with their tutor (author) as a Design Manager and the 'Future Factory' as a conduit to clients and real live briefs.

For the purposes of continuity in this paper the innovation will be described as the 'Consortium' although each of the design consultancies set-up annually by the student groups had their own name and distinct brand, which will be used in relation to describing their experience the term 'Consortium' will be used when referring to the innovation as a whole. The 'Consortium' was run across a three-year period with 3 different cohorts engaging with the experience, with a mixture of university and home based working models. The 'Consortium' was reviewed at the end of each academic year to recognise the lessons that had been learnt and plan to build upon these lessons for the following year in an educational action research model, involving a cyclical 4 stage process. Identifying the problem, planning an action, implementing the action and evaluating the impact [5].

## 3 DELIVERY

In total, 15 Product Design students undertook the 'Consortium' across a three-year period. The first cohort in 2013-14 solely involved BSc Product design students who created their own consultancy called 'Design View' and undertook projects predominately with 'Future Factory' clients. With this being the first year that the Consortium had run it was very much a learning exercise for all involved and was very quickly put together following the original inspiration in May to the discussions with the 'Hive' and 'Future Factory' to consolidating the parameters and support in July and the students starting in September 2013. This cohort consisted of four students in total; however, one of these worked part-time in the consultancy due to securing a placement shortly after starting however, he wished to continue with the project and took a role that suited this in marketing and sourcing new projects. Typically, this cohort worked out of the 'Hive', although one student worked from home and travelled in for a weekly meeting and another left after Christmas to undertake an Erasmus semester abroad. All students were from the same course and so already knew each other, therefore the need to build up the team dynamics was not as crucial as suspected by the staff involved. As part of the induction students were introduced to Tuckman's stages of group development [6] and given guidance

on how to manage conflict and difference within the team; students were also asked to report on team and work development in weekly meetings with the Design Manager.

The 2014-15 cohorts consisted of three BSc Product Design students and two BA Product Design students, who named their consultancy 'Anomaly'. This group worked from the university with two members distance working at home, with the requirement to attend the university at least one day per week. The group were very adept with remote modern working and ensured communication with members through a continual presence on Skype, whilst working as a team from laptops in meeting rooms at the university as communicated in their promotional video [7].

The 2015-16 cohort is the one that we know the least about as they worked away from the university in a shared house in Leamington Spa, engaging only with the 'Hive' over Skype. This cohort also consisted entirely of BA Product Design students. By this point, funding for the 'Future Factory' had ceased and so with projects for the students to engage with, therefore all the work undertaken by this group of students was externally sourced. This group was larger than previous cohorts were and more successful in terms on funding partly due to the lack of a requirement to work on underfunded work. The group also operated in a very different way due to their proximity in living quarters.

#### 4 REFLECTION

The findings from these three cohorts were different for all in some respects, due to the approaches that each cohort took in sourcing work or organising their teams with the business advisor and academic design manager acting in an advisory role when required. 'Design View' worked mainly on 'Future Factory' projects that were by their nature unpaid and they supplemented these with a few of their own sourced projects. The group worked on a wide range of projects involving mobility aids for the disabled and a new buggy design to product packaging and branding. The range of projects undertaken involved technical design, with working prototyping requirements to the use of graphical techniques and user profiling for the branding of proposed products. The total turnover was a rather small sum compared to subsequent cohorts but this is not to detract from what was achieved; a total of 9 projects were undertaken between the small groups, two of which were large technically orientated projects for the 'Future Factory'.

Unlike 'Design View', 'Anomaly' members did not know each other very well prior to joining. The team comprised of members from two different courses and due to the way that the team were selected; even those from the same course were not familiar with working together. Tensions did arise initially, whilst students found a common way of working together, but came to a head again by the end of the first term. The team was very unhappy with one team member who was working away from the university all week and not making the required weekly meeting, furthermore he was not delivering on time, which resulted in them losing a contract. This led to an intervention with both the business advisor and design manager and despite attempts at mediation resulted in the individual opting to leave under threat of dismissal from the rest of the team. This was a particularly difficult situation not least because the students knew that in final year they might have to engage with this particular student on the course. However, the result was that the remaining four members became a far closer-knit team. This group made approximately £4000 from paid design work that they sourced themselves; this group undertook a smaller number of 'Future Factory' projects, which were less complicated in nature than those of the previous cohort. As a result, the group engaged with a range of external agencies and undertook an impressive 12 projects. However, the observation of the lead academic was that most of the paid work they had undertaken was mainly graphical in nature, involving branding and websites with few opportunities for the students to build on their technical skill set, from the 'Future Factory' sourced projects.

#### 5 FURTHER WORK

The Consortium was not continued following the 2015-16 cohort. This was for a number of reasons, but namely that the 'Consortium' was originally offered to support students on the BSc Product Design course that lacked placement opportunities. By in 2015-16 no students from that course chose, to or indeed needed to engage with the offering, due to a rise in the number of students becoming placed in industry or electing to undertake a semester abroad. This was an indication of success of the other employability interventions in the programme [3] and a sign of success of the 'Consortium', which was always seen as a temporary measure by the lead academic. Furthermore, erosion of the EDRF grants meant that from September 2015 the 'Future Factory' ceased to exist and was relaunched

in a different form. Therefore, the original impetus of the 'Consortium' changed and it was found that as the year's progressed students were obtaining design work that was less related to their course of study being digital and graphic and less 3D product based, this was particularly pertinent in the final year after the 'Future Factory' involvement ended.

The structure and merit of the 'Consortium' could be restarted at any time, as strong links remain from the involvement between 'The Hive' and the Product Design department, but it is felt by the author that whilst the 'Consortium' offered an excellent opportunity to students who couldn't obtain a placement. It was seen as a 'Plan B' and not as preferable as an industry placement. The reasons for this are the lack of an industrial working environment, whilst the students gained a wealth of skills that were not part of the experience of a traditional industry placement for instance, entrepreneurship, sales and networking, team management and even leadership. The 'Consortium' could not provide an experience or environment that mimicked working in larger organisations.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The 'Consortium' was successful in a number of measures, the students all grew in confidence and independence throughout the experience and praised the opportunity in their reflective reports. However, how the experience has prepared these students for the world of work is of more interest to the author, and contact has been lost with a couple of the students from the earliest cohort. The author did contact 2 students from the 2013-14 and 4 from the 2014-15 cohort to gain their respective impressions 3 and 2 years on respectively, with these students at this time having been graduates for between 1-2 years dependant on their year. Typically, the students felt that it was a worthwhile exercise and that they had learnt a lot about business, teamwork, their own self-management and opportunities for self-employment from the experience. However, few managed to convert their experiences from the 'Consortium' experience in relation to Product Design careers. From the 2013-14 cohort only two could be tracked down and whilst both work in aligned fields, one is a design engineer at a large automotive brand and the others is sales focused in luxury design furnishings. This sales role however is quite a development for the student who by his own admission who was incredibly shy at the start of his involvement in 'Design View' and grew in confidence in speaking publically through the networking events that he attended.

From the larger 2014-15 cohort all 5 students were contacted, but only one currently is in a design position in industry, whilst another is in a research role at the university, one is a recruitment consultant and two are employed in administration roles. However, feedback from these last two students was still positive. Both recognised from their experiences that a design career wasn't for them, but that the soft skills and experience of working with different businesses has been beneficial to their current employment and that they feel that they would consider becoming self-employed in the future as a result of their experiences in the 'Consortium'.

The limitations of this study are the small sample size and the fact that it was been conducted in a single institution, with a single country focus. However, whilst the nature of the resources at Nottingham Trent University made this possible in a manner that may not be immediately replicable in other HE institutions, useful lessons and examples can be drawn from the exercise, to enable similar opportunities to be explored. Perhaps there is even potential for future collaboration between universities situated regionally in the future.

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