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What impact does coaching have on undergraduates' career planning, development of their transferable skills and therefore their employability?

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Background

Employability is a key focus across Universities. At BSU 42% of graduates within the school of education for 2005-6 gained employment compared to the national average of 58%. (This data excludes those who take up places as PGCE trainees) (Source: HESA DLHE 2007 and HESA ad hoc query for Guardian University Guide).

Coaching has been promoted within the business context for some years and has more recently been promoted in education; it is seen as a tool to enhance professional development and effectiveness (CUREE 2007). Teachers are also recognising the effectiveness of the coaching approach to support the learning of pupils and students and it is becoming embedded within the culture of schools. At present, however, it is not part of the culture in all higher education institutions, although it is now being introduced in some. This research will develop the University's expertise in an emerging field of vital importance to HE in order to support student's employability. "One of the essential premises of coaching is that life is a learning opportunity. We have to become lifelong learners to make ourselves marketable in a knowledge-based economy and, hence, have to commit ourselves to continuous learning throughout our careers." (Zeus P & Skiffington S, 2000 p182).

Research Questions

What are students' perceptions of their abilities linked to career planning, transferable skills and employability?

What perceived impact would coaching have on a small group of students

What themes do students choose for coaching?

What are the perceived effects of coaching?

What perceived impact did coaching have on the students' employment?

Methods

The coaching programme targetted a small sample of students, as case studies, in their third year in order to provide focused coaching intervention over a sustained period.

Student's perceptions of themselves were collected before the coaching experience using a framework which was devised based on an internal University paper "Learning Outcomes for Employability". Students scored themselves in a range of areas under the broad headings of: Entering the labour market; Personal attributes; Interactive attributes. Students then referred to this framework in order to identify areas that they would want to focus upon linked to employability (including transferable skills and career planning). The coaching process was used to help students to establish patterns of learning which would support them as lifelong learners.

The research explored the perceived impact that coaching had on these students in relation to their career planning, transferable skills and employability,

Three coaches were involved and students were allocated to one coach for all their sessions.

Students had between 6 and 8 sessions with their coach between December 2008 and May 2009.

At the end of the coaching experience student's perceptions of themselves were collected again using the same framework so that a comparison could be made. Ongoing diary notes were also kept by each of the coaches. Interviews took place at key points during the research. A follow up questionnaire will be used the following year to review the impact that coaching had on their perceived employability.

Frame

Boyatzis (2001) shares his Theory of Self-directed learning which is a framework which underpins the coaching process. He concludes that "adults learn what they want to learn. Other things, even if acquired temporarily (i.e., for a test), are soon forgotten (Specht and Sandlin, 1991). Students may act as if they care about learning something, go through the motions, but they proceed to disregard it or forget it-unless, it is something which they want to learn." (p10). The coaching process requires the coachee to set the agenda, identifying what they want to learn. They then work alongside their coach who helps them to establish current understanding, give them an opportunity to set goals and the support/challenge to achieve these goals. Coaching is based on the belief that people have potential and can find their own solutions. The job of the coach and the coaching process is to unlock that potential and those answers (Whitmore J, 2002). Coaching is an empowering process and supports life long learning. The TGROW and other models were used by the coach to support this process.

A framework was devised based on an internal University paper "Learning Outcomes for Employability". Students scored themselves in a range of areas under the broad headings of: Entering the labour market; Personal attributes; Interactive attributes. This framework was used to analyse results.

Research findings

It is recognised that the coaching involved a small sample and as the results are based on student perceptions they may be prone to distortion but it provides an indication of possible trends. From the research results, a positive impact was identified across all 3 key areas: Entering the labour market; Personal attributes; Interactive attributes. It appears that coaching had a strong impact on the majority of students' perceptions of their employability based on results within "Entering the Labour Market". "Personal attributes" and "Interactive Attributes" were aligned with employability and transferable skills; progress was also seen in these areas, with some students reporting much progress. As a result of coaching, some students chose to additionally visit other services, such as careers. They reported that their coaching was effective alongside. Coaching often covered more than one subcategory and perceived improvements were sometimes made in areas not directly focused upon. Results of each student's perceptions were very individualised therefore sharing average scores doesn't provide an accurate reflection of the results; the individual stories are more relevant. Examples of individual students' profiles and comments will be shared. A follow up questionnaire will be used to review the impact that coaching had on their perceived employability; results from this will be shared at the conference. The benefits of the coaching process for the students are identified and recommendations are made as to how the approach could be used with a larger student population in subsequent years.