**Learning & Teaching Enhancement Project Final Report:**

**Online Professional Skills Courses: evaluating, developing and disseminating: July 2018**

**Introduction**

A suite of three 0-credit online professional skills courses, aiming to provide a minimum level of careers and employability related professional skills training for all undergraduate students, have been developed for undergraduate students. The topics covered within this suite of courses fit closely with the ‘in, through and out’ student transitions enhancement theme, with PD1001 supporting incoming students transitioning into study (reflecting the skills and attributes they enter with and planning continuing their development in the context of the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes), PD2001 supporting current students finding and transitioning into work experience opportunities during their studies and PD3001 helping students to plan their next steps out of University.

**Professional Skills Course Outlines:**

The suite of three online professional skills courses are designed to deliver a minimum level of careers and employability provision for all undergraduate University of Aberdeen students. The intended learning outcomes are designed with the identified needs of the target year groups from level 1 to level 3 in mind. Table 1 summarises the course topics covered for each of the three professional skills courses.

Table 1:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| PD1001 Course Summary | PD2001 Course Summary | PD3001 Course Summary |
| The course will develop the employability of students through engaging them in their development of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes through the co-curriculum. The course will introduce students to the concepts and importance of health, safety and wellbeing and equality and diversity awareness. | The course will develop the employability of students through equipping them with the necessary tools to market themselves for employment and further study opportunities and identify and secure work experience opportunities. | The course will develop the employability of students through equipping them with the necessary skills to develop well researched career plans and identify suitable opportunities for graduate employment or postgraduate study. |

**Project Proposal and Aims:**

This project evaluates the impact of the online professional skills courses on students transitioning in a variety of contexts at each stage of their academic studies from level 1 to level 3. The aims of the project are to:

1) Assess the impact of the online professional skills courses on the student participants’ achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

2) Identify any areas of weakness in the current provision of online professional skills courses to inform course development work.

3) Produce a short showcase video to increase awareness of the online professional skills courses in the university staff and student community and wider Careers and HE communities.

**Aim 1: Results & Outcomes**

To assess the impact of the online professional skills courses on the student participants’ achievement of the intended learning outcomes, participants rate their level of confidence against a set of learning outcome statements before they start the course, and again at the end. The results are summarised in figures 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1: PD1001 course participant responses against learning outcome statements before and after completing the course

Figure 2: PD2001 course participant responses against learning outcome statements before and after completing the course

Figure 3: PD3001 course participant responses against learning outcome statements before and after completing the course

In summary, the results show a positive shift in participants’ confidence ratings against the learning outcomes statements in all three of the courses. Overall, 98% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they had achieved each learning outcome by the end of the course.

In addition, course participants are asked about the actions they have taken subsequent to completing each of the courses. Overall, 93% reported taking at least one employability-related action as a result of completing a level 1 professional skills course. The actions taken by participants included 45% researching opportunities to get involved, 44% working towards developing further skills and attributes and 40% started to keep a record of their skills, activities and achievements. In contrast, only 28% reported that they had joined or applied for co-curricular or extra-curricular additional activities or responsibilities. Given this data is captured on completion of the course, a further follow-up in the next academic year is recommended to ascertain whether this lower percentage is due to the timescales involved in applying for these opportunities.

**Aim 2: Results & Outcomes**

In-depth interviews and focus groups identified areas of strength and weakness in the current provision of online professional skills courses. The findings have informed online course development and improvements. The main findings from these research exercises are as follows:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 students who have completed the PD1001 course. The results provide an in depth insight into the experiences of a range of course participants, highlighting the issues faced by these participants, the reactions of these participants to the learning and the impact their learning experiences have had in developing their employability. The outcomes of these findings are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Online professional skills course design recommendations

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Design recommendations** | **Rationale** |
| Text information needs to be brief and consider use of bullet point lists to present text. | Participants often reported skim reading text and skipping text. Participants highlighted brief text and bullet point lists as positive aspects of the online professional skills course. |
| Appearance needs to be clear, simple and professional | Participants spoke about how the professional and clear and simple presentation helped keep them engaged in the course. |
| Navigation should be consistent and logical | Participants indicated clear navigation within the course was perceived positively and in a trial course where navigation was less consistent, this was noted by participants as a negative. |
| Learning activities should to be varied using the wide variety of technological capabilities. | This will help to keep participants engaged and contribute to learning breadth and depth. Learning activities received particularly well within the interviewees were brief text pages, example case studies and drag & drop activities. |
| Design alternative learning activities and incorporate some elements of choice where possible | In particular, videos split the respondents with half liking them and half not watching them. For these participants providing an alternative crib sheet could increase the likelihood of them engaging with that topic. |
| Learning activities designed to reflect and record personal plans and learning outcomes should be supported. | Participants valued the activities which allowed them to reflect and record their skills development goals and plans, but needed more support in these activities. This could involve consideration of online chat tools and forums to provide formal opportunties to discuss with the course coordinator and share experiences, difficulties and questions. Key learning activities such as this should also be monitored in some way as one study finding was that learners will skip activities if they know it is not required to pass. |
| Identify mechanisms for reporting and resolving technical problems associated with the online course. | Participants had experienced technical problems, particularly in the course trial. Participants didn’t necessarily report them immediately and some participants just accepted that these aspects didn’t work. |
| Identify possible solutions to enable participants to retain and continue to develop and record their activities relating to the careers and employability topic once the course has ended. | Some participants indicated they would value a system for continued use upon completion of the course. This is particularly relevant to careers and employability topics which continue to be important and relevant to participants. Qualitative methods such as PDP portfolios could be useful to capture longer-term measurements of learning gain. |

1. Focus groups (three groups w/c 25th September 2017) were conducted to gain an insight into the breadth and contrasting experiences of students undertaking the online professional skills course(s). Six participants attended each focus group and a semi-structured approach was taken (the prompt questions are available in appendix 1). From the focus group discussions, the following themes emerged:

* Positive impact and outcomes highlighted by the participating students included:
  + The SMART Goals section of PD1001 was identified as being helpful to plan more efficiently
  + Participants reporting having an interest in finding out more about careers and gaining work experience as a result of completing a course
  + Some participants suggested the PD2001 course was helpful in structuring CV and cover letters
  + Aspects of the technology used to deliver the courses were raised, with participants finding the function to save work and return to it particularly helpful.
  + Overall, participants particularly valued the opportunity for self-reflection and found the examples [provided through case study examples throughout the three courses] helpful in showing application and developing their understanding of the topics.
* Development ideas emerging from the discussions included:
  + Participants highlighted the need for more support to show students how they can achieve the Graduate Attributes
  + Questions were raised around some of the diversity topics covered in PD1001 with the content prompting in depth discussions amongst the participants
  + A number of technical issues were highlighted as barriers to completing aspects of the courses, particularly around the function to save and return progress within the course, and the facility to save and print the results of some of the course activities.
  + The PD1001 course is now prescribed for all level 1 undergraduate students and this prompted in depth discussion with two extremes of opinion. One group indicated that prescribing the course was necessary to ensure students completed it, with the other group suggesting that students won’t engage with it as fully if they have to do it.

**Aim 3: Results & Outcomes**

The following actions have increased awareness of the online professional skills courses in the university staff and student community and wider Careers and HE communities.

* An Infographic (see Appendix 2) was designed to present visually illustrate the impact of the PD1001 course on the student experience. This was displayed as a poster at the University of Aberdeen CAD Symposium Conference in May 2018 during which, a wide range of positive discussions with academic staff resulted in raising awareness of the courses.
* Findings, and best-practice online careers and employability recommendations have been disseminated across the Higher Education Careers profession via the following:
  + Workshop presented at the AGCAS national annual conference: September 2017
  + Workshop presented at the AGCAS Scotland annual conference: June 2017
  + Online demonstration and workshop delivered to a range of services across Europe: July 2017
  + Ad hoc online demonstrations with a range of UK Careers Services: 2017-2018

**Summary and Next Steps**

As a result of this project, the following actions have been taken forward:

* Further development work identified through this project to improve the online professional skills courses based on the design recommendations will be implemented in time for the 2018-2019 course launch. Changes include the design of new course templates to refine the navigation and user experience, and an update in the design software to resolve some technical access issues identified.
* A short showcase video, designed using Videoscribe software (purchased with LTEP funding), will showcase the developments made to the online careers and employability courses as a result of this project. The video will be finalised and uploaded to the Careers Service YouTube channel and embedded in the relevant section(s) of the Careers Service website in time for the 2018-2019 course launch.
* This project report will be available on the relevant section of the Careers Service website and will be highlighted and linked to in communications to university staff.

**Further information and contacts**

For further information and discussion about this project and the online professional skills courses, please contact the course coordinators:

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APPENDIX 1:

**Focus Group Plan: LTEP Project September 2017: Aims of focus group:**

1) Assess the impact of the online professional skills courses on the student participants’ achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

2) Identify any areas of weakness in the current provision of online professional skills courses to inform course development work.

Questions:

1. **Which course(s) did you take? Why (if not prescribed)?** (split into two groups for topics based discussion later on based on answers)
2. **When did you take the course and what prompted you to do it at that time?**
3. **What were your expectations re the course(s) and in what ways did these differ to your experience of taking the course(s)?**
4. **What was your level of understanding about the topics covered before you started?** 
   1. developing graduate attributes
   2. health, safety & wellbeing
   3. equality & diversity
   4. presenting yourself effectively
   5. finding work experience
5. **What experiences had you already had relating to the topic(s) and in what ways were you able to relate these experiences to the course materials/activities?** 
   1. developing graduate attributes
   2. health, safety & wellbeing
   3. equality & diversity
   4. presenting yourself effectively
   5. finding work experience
6. **Which course activities/topics did you find of most [and least] interest/relevance and why?** Get the participants to note in two columns on flip chart paper

Open question first, use the following list of course activities to base discussion about specific activities in more depth.

Introduction (PD1001/PD2001)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **PD1001** | **PD2001** |
| * Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities * Discovering the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes * Assessing your skills and attributes * Planning your development (SMART goals) | Presenting yourself effectively   * Communicating your skills experiences and achievements * Creating targeted applications * Preparing for interviews and assessment centres * Networking and managing your online identity |
| * Health, Safety & Wellbeing * Equality & Diversity | Finding work experience   * Work experience and volunteering * Finding opportunities and making applications * Making the most of your work experience |

Summary (PD1001/PD2001)

* Post course ratings and view against pre-course ratings to see progress made

**8a) Rate in terms of preference (1 – 5 with 1 being most preferred):** hand out cards to put in order and take picture of results

Quizzes | Drag and drop activities | Videos | Text | Writing/Doing activities

**8b) Discuss reason(s) for ratings**

1. **Discuss level of understanding about the intended learning outcomes using the following questions (Learning measure)** Ask a couple of questions around LOs

What are the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes and how do you think they are relevant to you?

What ways are you aware of to get involved in developing your Aberdeen Graduate Attributes through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities?

How would you keep a record of your skills and experiences developed and communicate them effectively to others (such as employers)?

In what ways are you planning your development of skills and experiences and what do you understand about setting SMART goals?

1. **Were there any aspects of the course/topics which you disagreed with or caused confusion?**
2. **Are there areas of the course you are still confused/unsure about in terms of your own circumstances? What would have helped you?**
3. **Since completing the course, what have you done in relation to the course topics? Behaviour measure**

Examples could include:

* Getting involved in co-curricular and/or extra-curricular activities.
* Setting SMART goal(s) (relating to Aberdeen Graduate Attributes?)
* Researched work experience opportunities
* Secured work experience
* Written a CV
* Requested feedback on an application

APPENDIX 2:

