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From fourth year to the outside world: Are we making our fashion graduates 'work ready' – are their skills transferable into the workplace?

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ABSTRACT: An honours year of any degree performs a valuable platform in enhancing the relevant skills sets, aiding the students to become more 'work ready'. These skill sets take into account the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) benchmarks translating themselves to Level Learning Outcomes (LLOs) within the University context. However, many Robert Gordon University (RGU) fashion graduates transition into both fashion and non-fashion employment, requiring a transferable skill set. The employment market is being disrupted in two ways; career paths are becoming very transient, with skill requirements becoming more digitally and soft skill focused. Universities have to respond to these changes, embedding them in course content.

This research adopted a mixed method approach to examine the alumni perspective on the skill sets they have gained from the degree and to see if they have transferred into employment or not, taking into account the provisions in place to aid the students towards finding employment.

The data analysis highlighted that alumni felt they had a skill set which transferred into employment whether fashion related or not, but there were gaps in digital and group/soft skills. Additionally, it was found that many of them had not used Careers services when transitioning out of University due in part to not knowing about the services and feeling that it was their own responsibility. Recommendations provide some solutions for debate and further research.

1.0   Introduction:

The stimulation for investigating this topic arose from the recognition that skills required for the workplace are disrupting, with digital and soft skills becoming a strong requirement in the workplace. Coupled with this, research highlights the need for employees to be able to work in an environment comprising various colleagues, requiring a range of 'soft skills'. As Head of Year for stage four, responsible for their Professional Skills Enhancement Programme (PSEP) it provides sessions to aid the student in transitioning from University. Taking this into account, the purpose of this paper is to examine the transferability of the skills delivered (LLO's) in the honours year to students on the Fashion Management Degree at RGU, into a 'disrupted' workplace.

2.0   Literature:

Students leaving University and embarking on their first employment are often faced with competition for places on graduate schemes or first destination employment (High Fliers 2016). Robert Gordon University is the top University in Scotland for graduate prospects (Guardian 2017). However, the UK economy is changing with many areas of employment being focused on the incorporation of 'digital skills' (Trowbridge 2016) within jobs. A CBI (2014) report highlighted (61%) of employees as having weaknesses in IT skills, which is furthered by the ECOYRS UK report (2016) which discusses the importance of digital skills and highlights the UK is slipping in that area.

The fashion industry, a strong sector of the UK economy (Oxford Economics 2014) is becoming highly digitised through Omni-channel routes of delivery of both communication (customer relationship management) channels and product sales. Job titles are changing to reflect the increasing development of attributes. For example, traditional communication roles are being repackaged as Digital Storytellers. A recent search on LinkedIn provides 293,230 people with jobs with that title (LinkedIn 2017).

Notwithstanding this shift, there has been an increasingly holistic approach to graduate skills development as Harvey (2002) highlighted. Traditional graduate skills have to be transferrable and attribute based inclusive of; communication and interpersonal skills, team working, intellect and problem solving, critical and reflective ability, adaptability and risk-taking if organisations are to 'proact' to change (Harvey 2002; Mason et al. 2002). Harvey (2002) highlights the four broad areas of institutions enhancing employability inclusive of Central Support (RGU Careers) need for curricula development with embedded attribute development (Course Content and QAA benchmarks); innovative workplace experience (RGU placement office) and enabled reflection and recording of experience (RGU placement office workplace assessment).

Holistic approaches are reinforced by Black (2013) who cited stamina, dealing with people of all ages and cultures and managing upwards as key aspects of the workplace. Millar (2014) adds to this as she noted that whatever the University degree it is criteria such as being emotionally supported, having experiential deep learning and the development of 'soft skills' which were important factors. When examining a typical recruitment web site for employment, Monster.co.uk (2017) cites the following skills required for employment in the sector and include business focus, personal effectiveness, relationship management and critical thinking. This strengthens the debate that students have to be lifelong learners (Harvey *et al.*, 1997. Jenkins *et al.* 2002).

Often, some of these 'skills types' mentioned are embedded through the inclusion of group work in module assessments (Hodgkinson-Williams et al, 2008; Lave and Wenger 1991). Fearon et al. (2012) highlight it is 'increasingly recognised as a way for students to problem solve and demonstrate transferrable skills necessary for the workplace' (2012, p. 114). Hoadley and Kilner (2005) previously noted group work as related to the concept of 'social learning' which incorporates the communities for practice framework C4P. Although researched in the IT field the C4P model elucidates the development of 4 stages and a context which can be used 'by emulating the activities of industry teams on group projects' (Hoadley and Kilner, 2005. p. 53). This C4P tried to balance out the contention within any degree group work as some students don't pull their weight and academics try hard to incorporate various techniques to ensure equity across the cohort.

Robert Gordon University offers a BA (Hons) and MSc in Fashion Management which have been designed with the QAA benchmarks and employer viewpoints in mind. Norton's (2016) Higher Education Academy (HEA) report highlights the need to embed employability into University Degrees. The courses offer a wide range of modules covering the context of the industry from a practical and a management based perspective. This allows for an element of creativity to be underpinned academically. In terms of embedding employability workplace

experience is used to develop attributes which reflect the needs of Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) and the components of Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR). Recognition of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is given as focussing on employment. Mapping of elements between these and TEF (http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk) is occurring to TEF level one. The BA Hons achieved a 100% course satisfaction rating from the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2015-2106.

In examining these transferable attributes for graduates some universities have developed a skills sheet http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_183776_en.pdf, which provides for staff, a University-wide framework and common language for discussing skills development with students, and for students an attribute sheet which allows them to see the attributes, and the academic, personal and transferable dimensions using vocabulary that is employer friendly. RGU provides students with the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) http://www.hear.ac.uk/

As part of the 'reflecting on the course process' feedback on the course content comes via a number of usual sources, prompting changes. To date though no empirical research, to identify if the skills (LLOs) being delivered are transferrable into the workplace, given the points noted in the literature. Coupled with this, and the UK economy changing, here in Aberdeen, the downturn of the oil industry means it is important that courses deliver the attributes required for employment. This will help the graduate's transition from University to a workplace in the global marketplace, where holistic and transferrable attributes are necessary.

3.2   Methodology

The methodological approach adopted a four stage process which allowed for the breadth and depth of the topic to be examined. The stages included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, a snap survey e questionnaire and follow up one to one telephone interviews.

To develop an understanding of the skills transferability, the research began with focus groups involving a convenience sample of 6 Fashion students returning from placement into fourth year. Having been on placement they had experienced the use of many skills from their degree. This interpetavist process allowed for the researcher to explore their experiences (Bryman and Bell 2015) and identify any initial gaps in the transferability of skills into the workplace.

Post focus groups analysis, using thematic approaches (Bryman 2008), it highlighted some areas for further examination prior to stage 2 of the process. One to one semi-structured interviews (stage 2) were conducted with 2 Fashion Management alumni, conveniently selected from the LinkedIn, with one working in a fashion related role and one not. Here the interview focused on the LLO's and their transferability into their workplace. Adoption of this technique allowed for triangulation (Denscombe 2014), in aiding in the development of the e questionnaire, stage 3, of the research process.

A positivist (Saunders et al, 2012) research aspect was included with the development of an e-questionnaire for distribution to Alumni via the RGU database, allowing for an objective phase of research (Denscombe 2014). The questionnaire was structured with seven sections. The first section gathered personal data, with the remaining sections targeting the use of modified LLO's as questions asking respondent's perceptions on the LLO's transferability. A four point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) was adopted as it allowed for deductive analysis. Section six of the questionnaire examined thoughts on the missing skills identified through the qualitative research phases: being digital skills, group working and soft skills. The final section focused on the use of University training provisions for transferring into the workplace.

Post pilot, a step promoted by Bell (2010), the questionnaire was moved onto the Snap Survey platform and was distributed through RGU's Alumni Office, via email to 122 Fashion Management alumni held on the Database. A response rate of 16% was achieved after promoting the link on LinkedIn.

Stage four of the research concluded with the interviews (7) of alumni post questionnaire completion. Using one to one semi structured telephone interviews, the author extended some of the findings and used probing questions to get some suggestions as to the way forward.

The author recognises that there are limitations to this study primarily due to it being focused on a small sample of students in one institution and its lack of longitudinal research, the norm for qualitative research. This study would need to be replicated for other Fashion Management courses to validate the findings on a larger scale.

4.0   Findings/discussion

Given the amount of data collected the findings presented here focus on the most important themes from the interviews and questionnaire. These being; transferability of skills (LLOs) into the workplace, whether fashion related or not, potential gaps in skills and the use of provisions to aid student transition. One new theme, LinkedIn and its use, was elucidated from the research.

4.1 Transferability of skills (LLOs) into the workplace

The first 2 interviewees (A and B), pre questionnaire, expressed that the majority of skills (LLOs) had transferred into both their first destination and present job. They had high praise for the course highlighting it was 'a good course' (A and B) providing a good grounding for employment, whether fashion related or not. This point was echoed to a certain extent by all the respondents from the research. An even split of alumni respondents worked, either in or out of fashion.

For the questionnaire mean averages for most of the LLO questions leaned towards the positive side of the scale. (Some that did not are addressed in 4.2). Means for LLOs in the knowledge and understanding category ranged from Mn = 1.6-1.8 (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree), and for practical skills they ranged from Mn = 1.2-1.5 with leadership being the less favoured at Mn = 1.5. For intellectual skills means ranged from Mn = 1.5-1.8 where 'solving workplace problems autonomously' (Mn = 1.8) erred more to the mid range. The key employability skills, transferability and enterprise skills section garnered means from Mn = 1.6 to 2.1 where the 2.1 mean related to the use of the dissertation in the workplace. This point was rejected by the interviewees (1-7) 'suggesting that the actual research and independent approach were vital, but tailored to their jobs'.

These findings support the fact that the course received a 100% satisfaction rating in 2015-2016 (NSS 2016), although not all respondents came from that cohort but it does suggests that the skills have transferred into industry either fashion or non-fashion related. This also add to Norton's (2016) work on the employability of transferrable skills being embedded in the courses.

4.2 Potential gaps in skills

The exceptions to the transferability of the LLOs were identified when respondents were asked more specifically about 3 skills, those identified partly in the literature and from the first 2 stages of the research. These included; digital skills development (Mn = 2.5), development in group working (Mn= 2.4) considering conflict and negotiation and development of soft skills (Mn = 1.8).

The interviewee's provided similar confirmation with all 7 participants highlighting that although the course had computer usage within modules, skills required developed. Photoshop, Excel for formulae and the creation of digital portfolios were highlighted as key in and out of the fashion environment. App development was mentioned by interviewee 7 who indicated it is one of the main fashion developments as companies work towards seamless functioning through their value chain proposition. Mail chimp was highlighted as a digital tool for use in marketing campaigns (Interviewee 5). A final point worth noting by a number of interviewees (3, 5 and 7) was that more digital skills may have been introduced into the course since their graduation.

When examining group skills, all 7 interviewees indicated that this was an issue confirming the questionnaire responses (Mn = 2.4). Despite the amount of group work used in the course modules, there were comments relating to the transferability of this skill. In general the consensus was they (interviewees 7) did not feel ready for working in groups and dealing with people, when moving into the workplace. Some did not like group work as people did not work well together but realised the need for it. One comment related to changing the group composition (3) i.e. they were always in the same group and changing these about would be more realistic, and another suggested more empowerment within the group (5).

Closely related to group skills is the development of soft skills (Mn = 1.8) where the interviewees were more favourable than the questionnaire respondents in that this skill has transferred somewhat. Interviewees (1-7) credited the use of presentations, working with clients and workplace experience on the course as developing their soft skills.

This adds to the points raised by CBI (2014), ECOYRS (2016) and Trowbridge (2016) suggesting that digital skills are perhaps not embedded enough in the degree for transferability for both fashion and non-fashion related jobs. It also suggests that despite all the practices in place there may not be the transferability occurring as suggested (Harvey 2002).

In terms of the group work it adds to Black (2013) and Millar's (2014) points that group work and soft skills are important with transferability into the workplace. It also adds to the findings of Lave and Wenger (1991), Hoadley and Kilner (2005), Hodgkinson-Williams et al, (2008) and Fearon et al (2012) by furthering their research about embedding group work into degrees.

4.3 The use of provisions to aid student transition when leaving University

The final section of the questionnaire examined the use of the careers training provisions when leaving University to find employment. 10-20% of the respondents made use of how to develop your LinkedIn profile, assessment centre techniques, online job applications and how to deal with groups, whilst 40-50 % used the more commonly well-known CV preparation and interview techniques sessions. Despite this, when asked how important these provisions ranged from Mn = (1.4-2.0) on the agreement side of the scale, with LinkedIn ranked second (Mn = 1.6).

These findings were supported by the interviewees, although some pointed out their unawareness of these sessions. Some interviewees (3, 5) felt these provisions should not be the responsibility of the University but their own. In terms of solutions they felt that these training sessions were necessary but within the context of a 2 day workshop. Interviewee 3 clearly identified a need for graduates knowing what their skills sets were and how and they transferred to in the workplace to allow better self-promotion during job application and interviews. This finding was echoed by a number of interviewees who felt although their skills had transferred they were not always sure what these skills were. A point anecdotally confirmed by RGU careers. In addition a number of respondents did not know what the HEAR report was, thus negating its use.

A further point elucidated, was the overwhelming support for the use of LinkedIn in promoting yourself, for job applications and for networking. All 7 interviewees stated how important it was to have an active LinkedIn profile, with up to date skills, job roles and competencies included. Some stated (3) they had underestimated its use. Hutchins (2016) advocates the use of LinkedIn as a 'valuable resource for teaching professional development' (Abstract).

These points bring new information to the debate on transferability of skills as promoted by the University of Glasgow (2016), Harvey et al's work (1997; 2002) the use of HEAR (2016) and the way provisions are conducted for students transitioning into the workplace. It suggests that LinkedIn should be used from stage one of a course and updated as students move through the degree to find employment.

5.0   Recommendations Presented

Recommendations from this research are categorised into two main areas highlighted as skills inclusion and the way forward providing some solutions for enhancement.

5.1 Skills inclusion

Alumni strongly suggested most skills they acquired on the Fashion Management Degree were transferable into their workplace, whether it was a fashion related post or not. The areas incurring discussion were digital and soft/group skills. There has already been some modification to reflect the points raised, but further changes could be required. This could come in the form of the introduction of digital skills in all course modules and the introduction of a flexible module in 'change management'. For group work, academics could alter the group composition to reflect a more work like environment. The academic is in effect acting as the 'boss and a pilot of the C4P could be embedded.

5.2 The Way Forward as we show Fashion Management Graduates the door.

Contention existed as to who was responsible for helping students transition out of University. Mixed feelings existed as to whether University needs to 'play a part' in this final development. Secondly, an issue highlighted by most of the alumni interviewed is that fashion graduates do not know what skills they have and are not sure how to show this transferability.

The PSEP for stage four Fashion Management students could locate 'training' but not during semester as students don't attend, 'It's the easiest thing to dip out of' (Stage 4 student). The recommendation is that a 2 day training session be available post assessment submission. This would enhance RGU's Careers toolkit and newly implemented What's Next program.

Figure 1. RGU What's Next toolkit

In addition to the usual sessions required for this two day training, such as getting your CV work ready, it would include sessions on; getting your LinkedIn profile up to 'speed'. A skills transferability and awareness session coupled with an attribute sheet could be used such as that from the University of Glasgow http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_183776_en.pdf. This sheet would allow the graduate to recognise their skills (LLOs) in a more 'fit for purpose' manner.

6.0 Conclusions

It was clear from the research that the Fashion Management alumni suggested some changes are required in relation to the course content and in highlighting the transferability of skills. Despite recommendations being noted it is not clear what success these would have given the logistics of a 2 day workshop and getting the correct attributes on the skills sheet. Further collaboration and research is required to test these solutions and identify their potential.

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