DISTINGUISHED EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS
Category: Collaborative Excellence Award

Graduate wellbeing and resilience for the future workplace
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Our Collaborative Approach:

Belonging to Northern Ireland's civic University, we are passionate about student progression and providing our society with graduates who know they are professional and work ready. Our team approach is student centred (Gibbs et al., 2009) and our diverse experience delivers innovative curriculum for essential 21st century skills development (Crocket, 2015). This serves the core of the SoTL paradigm of shared knowledge, mutual learning, and the hallmark of true scholars (Cordie et al., 2020). Our inclusive and diverse team consists of a distinguished academic/consultant, a specialist employability expert/post primary teacher and an academic/successful entrepreneur. Consequently, we know employers expect graduates to be 'work-ready' from first-hand experience, focusing on resilience as one of the top three desired skills (CBI, 2019). Therefore, we are driven by Ulster's (5&50) aim to transform lives, stretch minds, and develop skills required by a growing economy. Our project positively impacted the student learning experience, encouraging global citizenship and contributing meaningfully to professional communities and wider society.

The Graduate Resilience project emerged after 3 months of collaborative integrated curriculum design, development, and piloting of two workshops for level 6 undergraduate students. The fusion of our team's professional and cognitive skills optimised a robust collaboration that facilitated innovative integrated curriculum design. On reflection our collaboration provided us with a 'community of teaching scholarship.' Moreover, we could take advantage of combining our individual professional expertise in teaching and professional practice that enabled the setting aside of assumptions to forge new ways of thinking for teaching and learning (Brookfield, 2017). This process of professional growth was based on reflective dialogue that occurred before, during and after our emancipatory curriculum design sessions. This provided the essential components of self and collaborative reflection harnessed in a safe place where sustained vulnerability supported our collective continuous professional development and practice.

We applaud innovative pedagogies, to shift focus and develop students who are better equipped to work through real-world, global issues (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016). Kolb (2015 p25) argues that "all genuine education comes about through experience where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". This is where the learner immerses themselves fully, openly and without bias in new experiences and can reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives and use this knowledge to make decisions and solve problems (Kolb, 2015). Therefore, to genuinely foster collaborative and authentic outcomes and deepen our 'active collaboration' undergraduate students were invited to engage in a workshop prior to piloting. This facilitated shared developmental experiences for the students supported by reflection, critical analysis, and construction of meaning. Furthermore, the students were immersed with their mind and body creating a contextually rich and personal experience around feelings and emotions. This resulted in deep conceptual understanding for "human cognition to develop to the highest level" for both their own and other's personal resilience and well-being (Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012, p. 19). [474 words]

Section C: Case Study of the Team-Based Initiative

Title: Graduate wellbeing and resilience for the future workplace.

Summary: This case study shares the rationale, purpose, implementation, and success of an integrated collaborative curriculum design project. The two workshops are designed into the curriculum for Final Year transitioning students, aligned to the purpose of integrating the 21st Century skills agenda and meeting the aims of Ulster's Learning, teaching and Employability strategies (2018-2024). In accord with Crocket (2015) graduates need to be confident in their entrepreneurial endeavour; resilient and responsive to change; exhibit professionalism; become global citizens; and meaningfully contribute to our professional communities and wider society.

Key words: graduate resilience; well-being; work ready

What was done:

This case study shares the integrated curriculum design, collaboration, operationalisation, and success of two graduate wellbeing and resilience workshops. These workshops were delivered within a compulsory final year module across a number of faculties with the aim of enhancing graduate 'work readiness' associated with the 21st Century skills agenda. Aligning to Ulster's (5&50) the workshops aimed to develop the unique attributes of an Ulster graduate and prepare graduates to be engaged contributors to a global and interconnected society. Emancipatory pedagogical design underpinned the workshops, creating an inclusive and diverse student learning environment facilitating authentic independent learning, economically important skills, and intellectual capital (5&50). In 2020, with tenacious agility the collaborative team converted the workshops to 100% online delivery that embraced emergent technologies to complement our learning and teaching practices (5&50). As 'active collaborators' with diverse expertise we epitomised the SoTL and as a professional community of teaching scholarship (5&50) we forged novel and innovative ways of thinking, teaching and learning (UKPSF Descriptor 3 Vii) to enhance the student learning experience. Pre and post workshop student feedback evidences the embedding of practical coping strategies for resilience and wellbeing in preparing transitioning graduates for the future workplace. [195 words]

Motivation and aims:

The 'Graduate Resilience' project aimed, through emancipatory pedagogy, to develop transitioning student's understanding of resilience and personal wellbeing, deepen their self-awareness as professionals, and prepare them for the future workplace.

The rationale for the project was based on sound academic research which emphasised the need for graduates to develop adaptability (Magowan, 2018), capacity to know and be (Barnett & Coate, 2005) and enabled to become more resilient, recover and bounce back (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017), particularly in today's dynamic and challenging work environment. McIntosh and Shaw (2017) further proport that in developing the resilient graduate, the learning environment cannot be separated from the real-world context in which the student will eventually find themselves. The project team therefore recognised an essential need to provide students with learning opportunities aligned to this concept of 'being' thus developing a clearer sense of themselves and their capabilities, how to gain self-confidence and become the best version of themselves on (and beyond) graduation. Consequently, the project team appreciated the transformational nature of emancipatory pedagogic design, tapping into the consciousness of how the student sees and behaves in the world, empowering them through providing tools and techniques designed to develop skills and coping strategies to build resilience and wellbeing.

Norton (2009) asserts that action research for teaching and learning needs to be reflective in nature with the aim of improving some aspect of the student learning experience. To this end the 'Graduate Resilience' project fits within an action research approach which "is fundamentally about the transformation of practice" (McIntosh, 2010, p35) and an enhancement to the student learning experience.

Motivations for the intervention were further strengthened by research stating students were increasingly experiencing mental health problems and mental distress, and studies into the current pandemic were reporting elevated rates of anxiety, depression, stress, suicide risk and post-traumatic stress (Unite, 2016; Daly et al., 2020). Resilience provides students with capacity to deal with difficult emotions, including stress and anxiety, that can impact negatively on their performance (Claxton, 2002). Stallman (2011) further states, resilience is not an innate trait but rather, encompasses ways of thinking and action that can be learnt and developed in all students through a student-centred emancipatory immersive pedagogic design. [365 words]

Implementation:
The range of teaching experience across the team members facilitated agreement that emancipatory pedagogy would be key to the creation and delivery of this programme. This approach was to ensure that the participatory activities produced meaningful personal reflections on existing behaviours. Research shows developing student awareness of their behaviours and emotions can develop resilient and mindful leadership competencies that are in turn more likely to result in action and behavioural change (Sharples et al., 2016). This professional practice acknowledges the wider context in which higher education operates and recognises implications for professional practice (UKPSF – professional values V4).

The two "Resilient Graduate" workshops were piloted in the spring of 2019 with 119 students on two core modules in UUBS. The team co-delivered the first of these with three external experts then immediately held a focus group of all facilitators, 3 observing academic staff, 2 graduates and 8 students. A further focus group of 6 students, 5 facilitators and 2 observing Career Consultants was held after the second workshop. Student feedback requested more activities and fewer facilitators and staff suggested re-ordering several activities throughout the two workshops. This feedback informed the re-design of the second version of the project which was delivered across three Faculties (6 Schools) to 409 students on 10 courses in 2019-20. Four additional Careers Consultants were trained to co-deliver the workshops to support delivery across campuses. Student Wellbeing colleagues observed workshops and subsequently invited the team to contribute to the 2020-21 Inclusive Practice Pedagogical Series.

The pandemic necessitated migration to a virtual platform, but the team wanted to retain integrity and student learning gains. They met several times through the summer of 2020 to re-visit Learning Outcomes and re-design both workshops. Further research around the "millennials" and Generation Z and growth mindsets (Dweck, Walton & Cohen, 2014) formed the active content of these workshops along with ODL training in Spring and Summer 2020 on active digital learning. This was delivered to 350 students across 7 courses in 3 Schools. Student participation levels were high (90%) as they could remain anonymous while contributing to sensitive subjects around anxiety and stress using the virtual whiteboard. Student and staff feedback indicated that despite the team's concerns, subject content lent itself effectively to online learning, as offered by a Product Design student *"I loved the interactivity & being online I could participate in everything without people seeing me. I liked being anonymous for whiteboard activities, I feel we could all be totally honest."*

This was supported by a module co-ordinator who co-delivered the virtual workshops:
"That session was Ace! Hats off to you – you have developed something really innovative and impactful. What to say….addressing a real issue for students; clever mix of pedagogical strategies with smart use of tech. Very relaxed and relatable style of delivery and leadership…… making this happen across degree programmes." [472 words]

Successes and lessons learnt:

There are many successes both for the project team and the students in terms of reflections and learning experiences. The collaborative approach worked extremely well, drawing on the team's strengths and skill sets to successfully design and deliver the project.

Evaluations conducted through focus groups indicated the workshops actively embedded practical coping strategies for resilience and mindfulness in transitioning graduates. Graduates expressed how transformative the workshops were in developing their awareness and capacity to be more resilient, providing them with opportunities to harness the competencies to cope more effectively with stressful and challenging situations. For example:

"My mindset has completely changed from last week because of the millennials video and the workshop. I now think that when I am stressed it is only 'right now' and it will pass soon…"

"Understanding what way I deal with conflict made me reflect on certain situations. The breathing techniques will be very useful"

"Made me feel really different and I am waking up much more positive…"

"I have to learn to deal with my anger. I was so stressed and ..angry with the rest of the team when it was me that was the problem!"

"It is easy to blame others … and so challenging as you could shout all you wanted at others but…….it's about understanding what other people are thinking and why they are behaving…"

Mentimeter provided excellent quantitative evaluations of the student learning gains after the two workshops. The 2020/21 feedback reported shifts of students' level of understanding of stress and coping strategies to calm down (pre 68% - post 94%), appreciation of emotional self-awareness (pre 31% - post 66%) and capacity to use techniques to enhance personal resilience and wellbeing (pre 68% - post 95%). Overall, 91% of students positively stated that the workshops were useful.

It is apparent adopting an emancipatory pedagogic approach was particularly beneficial in providing students with an opportunity to develop self-awareness, understanding and a greater sense of themselves. A quote provided in July 2021 from a 2019 graduate further evidences the longitudinal impact:
"I just wanted to highlight how much the workshops helped me become work ready and a resilient leader within Four Seasons. Being able to understand how to deal with stress, rejection, trauma, emotional intelligence & resilience, self-care, and meditation has all been so useful since entering the workplace. These skills have transformed how I manage myself and the wellbeing of the teams I now lead. It has made me the manager I am today, and I am delighted to inform you that of 1st August 2021, I move on to my next challenge....."

The challenges encountered included the emancipatory learning approach taking some academics outside their comfort zone and staff displaying resistance to module delivery time being utilised to embed resilience into the final year curriculum. The team were also concerned about student apathy and disengagement whereby they 'don't know what they don't know' in terms of the resilience required for the 'real world of work.' However, the project team recognised that embedding the workshops fully in the curriculum results in higher levels of attendance and more meaningful engagement alongside aligning the workshops to a small element of module assessment credit. Involving the module co-ordinator was also key as they had established a relationship and rapport with the student cohort, further encouraging attendance levels. An important lesson learnt was the need for academic staff and course teams to work collaboratively with Employability & Careers to draw on their expertise. Academic staff involved in co-delivering the workshops needed to appreciate the sensitive nature of some of the content and provide support signposting to Student Health & Wellbeing for safeguarding of students and the overall project.

The project team aspire to move the delivery back to a face-to-face learning as it facilitates the emancipatory experience more effectively than the online platform. The team wish to establish more champions in Faculties to work with Employability & Careers to further promote and widen levels of adoption and participation. We also plan to explore other opportunities for embedding resilience into earlier years of the curriculum, working closely with Student Health & Wellbeing. [686 words]

Transferability:

This programme's content and process is transferable, which is demonstrated by the fact that over the 3 years it has been implemented across 3 Faculties, 6 Schools and 12 disciplines. Understanding and building resilience and wellbeing are professional yet personal skills that are not affiliated with any specific academic discipline. At least 25 academic colleagues and 5 Career Consultants have observed, evaluated, and co-delivered these workshops, both on campus and online. The team have presented findings from this project within the university at UUBS Learning & Teaching Conference (2019) and the Employability Sub Committee and externally have widely disseminated the pedagogic design, content and evaluative findings at national levels, including well-received research output at the Advance HE Employability Symposium 2020, CABS Conference 2019 & 2021, AGCAS 2021 and a publication in the Journal of HESWBL 2020. The project team have been involved in mentoring and up-skilling both academic and Employability & Careers staff to enable scalability and transferability of the workshops across the University.
The module co-ordinator of a Sports Studies module who co-delivered the programme fed back that:
"The programme was excellent - very well received by the students not least because of its interactive nature. More importantly I was able to revisit key messages on resilience and leadership from the programme throughout the module.....when students were feeling overwhelmed."
[220 words]

Further information:

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