

Title: *Developing Consultancy Project Modules for Final Year Business Students*

Summary:

This case study outlines the development of innovative work based learning modules called Consultancy Project, Retail Consultancy Project and Marketing Consultancy Project. These modules are embedded in inquiry-based learning with the aim of developing students with an inquiring mind (Dewey 1997). They also align with the Universities agenda for global citizens due to the nature of the project work with local and international companies. I began to implement these modules during 2012 and have just recently embedded the Marketing Consultancy Project within a newly revalidated BSc Marketing programme. These modules also include the sustained mentorship of two staff members who worked in a student mentor and support role on these modules. I have taught these modules for the last seven years and have engaged in the Universities peer review system within these modules. In brief, these modules provide students, in groups of three, a real life consultancy project within a local company to complete within a 15-week period. The assessment is the production of a project proposal, a group presentation\digital animation, a consultancy report and a reflective portfolio.

What was done:

The aim and objectives of these modules are to ensure that students have a work based learning experience that is meaningful and allows them to have experience within the real world of business and not just in a simulated way. It provides those students who haven't undertaken a placement year with a real project to discuss during graduate interviews, therefore enhancing their employability skills. It emphasises the skills needed in employability (Yorke and Knight 2007) such as the ability to agree project proposals and plans, identify key management and business issues, work within tight deadlines, manage team work and engagement with different levels of employees and businesses with different needs. Hence, a novel approach to business education. This student engagement within businesses aligns with the DLHE survey and metrics for the University and fits with the Universities teaching and learning strategic aims. These modules also include the use of guest speakers during the first four weeks of semester. These speakers are business consultants working in both large and SME companies, and in this way current business practice is embedded throughout the modules.

Given my previous experience I have always been interested in developing my teaching with a focus on underpinning knowledge for life in a business context and in providing innovative modules such as these. This involves embedding the university's 'professional education for professional life' and the Learning and Teaching Strategy's priority of students' professional development and employability. Yorke (2006:8) defines graduate employability as "*a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes- that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy*". I believe these modules fit perfectly with this approach. This also aligns with the Universities Five and Fifty strategy under the global and civic engagement strand.

Motivation and aims:

These modules aim to consolidate and link theory taught on all course modules, with the application to real business contexts. In so doing, it allows students to learn about the relevant theories, gives them the ability to actually move from theory to practice and produce a strategic business solution for a real life context. These modules provide the opportunity for students to engage with business leaders working in a variety of industries as well as developing new understanding of leadership roles, values, motives and goals for becoming effective strategic managers through a range of tools and techniques. The insights from local business leaders provides positive role models and opportunities to network and learn from their practice. Additionally, it aids students in developing and refining their own management skills and

professional development. I use my extensive network of business contacts to gain interesting and rewarding projects, to date I have delivered over 100 of these projects to local businesses.

Implementation:

During first semester each academic year I contact local companies (I need around 15-19 projects each year for each module) and meet with them to develop suitable real life projects for my students. I develop project briefing documents to outline the basic idea of the projects. Then in second semester I deliver all of the theories and framework workshops in the first four weeks of semester spending two afternoons each week leading these. Content in these workshops is a recap of material learnt within their programme (projects are based on programme learning outcomes) and some new project management material. Simultaneously, I interview students during the first two weeks to allocate groups and company projects to match interests and abilities to projects and companies. I then allocate projects to student groups during week 3 of semester and ask students to make contact with the client companies before the end of week 4 of semester. The students then work with the company and meet with an assigned academic mentor each week to ensure the project is moving forward as it should. In the past I have mentored two other academics, Dr Aisling Reid and Mr Donald McFetridge each year to ensure they understand the demands of each project and what needs to be delivered. Currently I am mentoring Dr Donna Towe in preparation for the new Marketing Consultancy module to be delivered in the next academic year. This expands the skills and knowledge of the academic team whilst providing a worthwhile interesting experience for students in their final year.

During my early career I worked as a Software Engineer developing customer relationship management systems and as a freelance business consultant within this area. This experience along with my more recent consultancy experience over the last 15 years gave me the idea to develop real life project based modules for final year business and marketing undergraduates.

Successes and lessons learnt:

Great feedback from Client Companies over the seven years of these module has been received. The service that this module provides to the local business community has been estimated at around half a million pounds into the local business economy in relation to the cost of the consultancy, this figure does not include business impact that could amount to much more. See comments from businesses:

"I just wanted to let you know that the outcomes from these projects have, without fail, added considerable value to Neueda Consulting Ltd. and, in particular, have delivered real, tangible business benefits, such as justification and evidence for strategy, direction and business development.."

"Andrea, I believe that you are an asset to Ulster University and I have no hesitation in providing you and uour students with the highest recommendations for future consutlancy work with our company and with other partner companies. I look forward to working with you again in the future"

The coursework includes an individual self-reflection that outlines the student journey on the module. They use the theories from the teaching and learning literature to identify how they learn, the impact of this and what the output has been. Part of this reflection is an evaluation of the module and these are always enlightening. The feelings range from excitement to frightened but nearly always they end up enjoying the experience and have grown professionally as a result. See student comments:

“Andrea has went above and beyond for her final year consultancy students. She has brought a new type of teaching to the year which we have never encountered before”

“Andrea went out of her way to ensure that as a class we understood this new module, quick response to emails, detailed feedback to any questions asked, and provided the support needed for the consultancy module. She is an asset to the ulster business school”

The main challenge for me in the delivery of these modules is getting enough good quality projects each year for students. I use my extensive network of business contacts to gain interesting and rewarding projects. Sometimes it has been very last minute getting approval from companies.

The main student issue relates to group work in final year. As this module is mostly group work, due to the nature of the content and learning outcomes, it has been a challenge to deal with the ‘low participation’ students. However, I have now reorganised how I assess the presentation part, each student receives an individual mark for their performance on the day. The panel discuss each presentation directly afterwards to allocate fair marks. As a result of student feedback I have implemented a negative marking scheme for group mentor meetings whereby the students can lose up to 10% off their final mark if they fail to attend mentor meetings. Additionally, I use peer assessment forms allowing students to comment on group performance. I will continue to innovate these specific tools to ensure fairness of assessment within these modules.

Transferability:

The work that I have undertaken on these modules has been directly transferable to other staff members within the faculty, Mr Donald McFetridge developed a similar module for his retail students in relation to Consumer Behaviour. I have also work with other colleagues on other Marketing related modules to implement similar real life live projects into their curriculum. I always advocate these type of modules to colleagues I work with and during the recent revalidation of the MSc Marketing programme I led a team of academics to develop a new engaging curriculum that involved many project/work based learning modules.

As I have been a member of the departments’ business engagement group, faculty centre for SME development and currently the faculty Global Engagement committee. This has allowed me to advise other staff members on the implementation of such modules.

These Consultancy Project modules are a challenge to manage and deliver but they are both rewarding and enjoyable at the same time. They allow me to keep current with the local business environment whilst providing an engaging experience for students. I plan to develop more modules that include live projects and I have recently extended this concept to include international ERASMUS + partners.

Additionally, I have been working with the UUBS Associate Dean Education, Prof Heather Farley, to create a series of exemplar assessment rubrics for each of the assessment pieces within these modules. These exemplars are being disseminated around the faculty as best practice in the development of assessment rubrics. I have had very positive feedback on these.

Further information:

Link to my publications on PURE <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/persons/andrea-reid/publications/>

Student Feedback:

"Favourite module and lecturer out of all modules undertaken across four years, I have so much respect for Andrea she is a dedicated and hardworking individual. I found part class room based learning alongside actual work within a real life business environment to be invaluable. The module was interesting and highly informative giving an in depth insight into the role of a consultant. There was a great deal of support and guidance provided through the entire semester especially during the four weeks of mentoring sessions. Andrea is by far one of the best lecturers at UUC and a credit to the business school. She was always willing to assist us to ensure we were going in the right direction and provided constructive criticism which was a relief to know as a group we were on the right track for a successful project. I absolutely love the fact she is quick to respond to any email inquiries even out of office hours, where other lecturers in the business school are not and she consistently provides marks and feedback on assignments within two weeks. Overall I believe other lecturers can learn a thing or two from Andrea, she provides engaging content, is straight to the point in relation to what is expected and outlines clearly what needs to be done"

"We have been provided with real life industry experience where she matched us with a business in which we conducted a consultancy project for. This has given us a greater insight into a business environment which entailed conducting market research, this has been an invaluable experience in which we would have never gained and is so beneficial for final year students to prepare us for graduate jobs. Andrea is very helpful with providing detailed feedback for work, she is always quick to answer emails even at the weekends and is extremely helpful with guidance and advice to myself and other final year students. This woman goes above and beyond for her students."

Company Feedback:

"Andrea working with you and your students provided us with access to resources that would otherwise have incurred considerable financial costs, such as innovative business ideas delivered by students, latest business research and relevant academic and practitioner reports included in the students assignments. Keep in touch and will be happy to participate again"

"Andrea thanks for your hard work on our student projects, they have given us insight into innovative, modern business techniques that have had a direct positive impact on the way that we develop our business plan and define our strategy. Hope to work with you again"

MODULE TITLE Marketing Consultancy
MODULE CODE MKT545
EFFECTIVE FROM January 2020
MODULE LEVEL 6
CREDIT POINTS 20

MODULE INSTANCE(S)	Location	Semester	Module Coordinator	Teaching Staff
	Jordanstown	2	Reid, Andrea	

HOURS

Independent study	164 hrs
Workshops	12 hrs
Seminars	12 hrs
Lectures	12 hrs
TOTAL EFFORT HOURS	200 hrs

ACADEMIC SUBJECT Marketing

RATIONALE

This module seeks to provide the student with the opportunity to develop marketing consultancy skills through the management and application of a marketing consultancy project. Students will have the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills acquired during earlier parts of the programme at levels 4 and 5, in order to produce a range of 'best fit' solutions to problems faced by local businesses including small to medium size enterprises. Students will learn the importance of selecting appropriate marketing research methods and the basis for addressing real marketing management problems. The module is an integrating module for all course content as well as developing diagnostic analysis, task evaluation and project management skills.

AIMS

The overall aim of this module is to enable students to critically evaluate a specified real-life Marketing problem in order to develop a range of potential solutions.

Specifically, the aims of the module are:

- To introduce students to marketing consultancy as a key area of applied business activity and to enable them to acquire knowledge and understanding of some of the core areas of marketing consultancy;
- To develop research and project management skills to enable students to conduct a marketing consultancy project on a real-life business problem area;
- To ensure that students have the necessary competencies to prepare a well structured and well-presented marketing consultancy project report;
- To enhance and further develop knowledge, intellectual, professional and transferable skills that will help prepare students for a career in marketing