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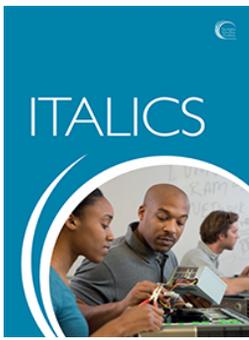
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## Employability Enhancement through Student advocacy

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# EMPLOYABILITY ENHANCEMENT THROUGH STUDENT ADVOCACY

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## ABSTRACT

*Many UK universities employ their enrolled students on a part-time basis as student ambassadors and in teaching support roles, for example as student proctors (Hampton and Potter 2009). However it is common elsewhere, for example in the United States of America, for universities and colleges to employ students in a much wider range of support roles (Hubbard and Klute, 2009). The many advantages of this strategy, to both the institution and to students, became apparent when a similar policy was implemented by a UK university from 2008. This paper focuses on feedback from some computing students based in the Student Experience Enhancement Unit (SEE-u) in Coventry University's Faculty of Engineering and Computing after being appointed as Student Advocates. Feedback collected recently from student advocates has been used as evidence in this paper to show that the employment and development of students as part time staff to undertake a wide range of tasks, can be an effective way to increase their graduate employment prospects and to improve their value to potential future employers.*

## Keywords

Employability, Student advocacy, Students supporting students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Students from all backgrounds often need to work during their studies to support themselves financially. According to Sullivan about 60% of English Higher Education students are engaged in some form of paid employment (Sullivan 2008). Any employment provides useful experience of the workplace, but some traditional student jobs do not significantly contribute to long-term career skills. This untapped potential was recognised by a team from Coventry University's Faculty of Engineering and Computing, who had spent some time studying the way many universities in the USA made effective use of their pool of available student labour on campus, to mutual advantage (Glendinning et al, 2008; Dunn and Glendinning 2009). This led in September 2008 to the foundation of the Faculty's Student Experience Enhancement Unit (SEE-u) and to the wider use of student employees in the roles of graduate interns and student proctors providing support for teaching and study related activities. This paper specifically focuses on the concept and operations of SEE-u and its student workforce.

The Unit was led by a small team of academics and professional staff, with an initial workforce of about 30 hourly-paid Student Advocates (SA) and a small number of student proctors and graduate interns. The SA duties were diverse, but focused around supporting their fellow students, supplementing and connecting to a range of existing services and support in the Faculty, University and beyond. SEE-u took a lead in driving changes to services and support by providing evidence from student-led research about what was seen to be poor practice, from the student perspective.

As the permanent Faculty workforce gained confidence in the value and quality of resources available from SEE-u, they began to identify roles for SAs across the administrative and academic areas of the Faculty. By June 2010 about 70 SAs were employed in various roles across the Faculty. In particular SAs were responsible for running all the receptions services in Faculty buildings, operating an advocacy service for more personalised student support and coordinating all the disability support and advice for Faculty students.

To equip student advocates for this role a comprehensive training programme was devised, supplemented by some in-service workshops. The training targeted many skills including customer care and service, counselling and mentoring, handling conflict, working in teams, running focus groups, designing and operating

surveys, understanding university systems and the annual operational cycle, meeting protocol, minute taking and report writing.

Most of the students were offered an individual informal appraisal each year during their employment, mainly to identify developmental needs and workplace assignment preferences. So far about 120 students have benefited through SA employment in SEE-u. Most of the original cohort have now completed their original course and moved on to either employment or further study and new SAs have been appointed to continue and help to develop the service.

A shorter version of this case study was submitted to a competition, held as part of the HEA ICS conference “Enhancing the Employability of Computing Students” held at University of Derby on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2011. The requirements for the February 2011 competition determined the scope of this paper, which reports about and analyses the views of ten computing students who have benefited through their employment with SEE-u.

## 2. RESEARCH APPROACH

The development of SEE-u was part of a wider strategy for the Faculty, based on evidence and a strong culture of research and publication about the lessons learned (Wilson-Medhurst and Glendinning 2009). The student voices data came from several different sources. In January 2010 personal appraisal interviews were conducted with student advocates to establish how the Unit was operating from the personal perspective and also to determine what further staff development needed to be provided. Responses were recorded in writing and each person agreed at the time to allow their interview notes to be used for research about SEE-u. Between December 2010 and January 2011 feedback was specifically procured for this case study by asking some current and previous SAs to write a short account of how they believed their personal skills and employability was enhanced by the experience of working for SEE-u. Third paper also draws on a third set of general feedback collected during April 2011 from Faculty staff and students as part of the three year operational and strategic review of SEE-u.

The SA workforce has included students from all disciplines covered by the Faculty of Engineering and Computing. This case study focused on the views of those SA respondents with a computing or IT focus in their studies or career expectations where data was available and their current situation was known. The comments have been made anonymous, but for context the table below summarises each participant.

Student	Country	Gender	Destination
Student A	Poland	Male	Master’s, now working in Network Security
Student B	Poland	Male	Studying for PhD
Student C	Lithuania	Male	Master’s study
Student D	Nigeria	Female	Master’s, worked for IBM, now studying for PhD
Student E	India	Male	Undergraduate Placement at 3M, now master’s study
Student F	Pakistan	Male	Masters, now working in Pakistan telecoms industry
Student G	India	Male	Software Engineer at Accenture, part-time PhD
Student H	Romania	Male	Continuing undergraduate (Networks and Mobile)
Student I	Iraq	Female	Master’s, now studying for PhD
Student J	UK	Male	Final year undergraduate (Computing)

Table 1: The sample of Student Advocates included in the Case Study

## 3. THE VOICES OF STUDENT ADVOCATES

For the case study survey the SA respondents expressed only positive views about the skills and knowledge gained in the course of their employment, summarized below. However more balanced feedback was

available through other surveys about SEE-u on which the next section of this paper draws. The contributions are collated into a set of common themes comparing feedback from several participants.

### **3.1 Enhanced IT Experience**

The previous working experience varied greatly between SAs. Many had a range of useful IT skills before becoming student advocates, although for some advocates this was their first ever paid job. By working with SEE-u they were able to conveniently combine work and study, earn money and continue to develop their IT skills.

Student A and Student F described an extensive IT project they were both assigned to, which necessitated communicating with team members, academic and professional support staff first to collect and organise information for a pre-induction web site, then to find answers to questions and queries that prospective students posted on the site. Student G was team leader for the pre-induction web site development project and designed and developed other IT systems during his employment, before taking up a post of IT consultant with Accucentre.

After employment in the Unit in a team leadership role Student D was appointed as a Database Administrator at IBM. She indicated that the experience of working in the UK and the management duties she undertook as part of her SA role were key factors to her securing the appointment.

Students D and G were international students. Their employment in SEE-u provided the opportunity for a strong UK work reference for prospective employers that in both cases helped to secure graduate appointments in IT roles.

### **3.2 Diverse Work-Related Experience**

All advocates stressed the importance of workplace skills they had acquired during their SEE-u duties and emphasised how diverse and rich their duties were. Many of the respondents said their roles required them to complete a wide range of different tasks according to their assignments at different times. Student E said that believed his SA job was the most varied role in his employment to date and that he was happy to have learnt so many different things which would be very useful in the future.

In line with this view, Student I asserted that the experience she had as a student advocate “defined the core skills” for the workplace. She referred to the detailed nature and structure of the training and experiential learning, which equipped her for conducting research and development and incorporated many transferable skills. Student C explained that it can be difficult to get any job in the UK without relevant work experience even after graduating from university. He believed that experience of UK working life practices, combined with the need for effective communications in different forms and at various levels, constituted relevant skills and competences for both current and future employment.

Commenting on the diversity of the work done, Student D said that it had been a very challenging opportunity which she would recommend to all International students.

### **3.3 Communications**

Functioning as a team member and sometimes team leader, learning to respect colleagues and communicating with different individuals were frequently cited as essential skills and qualities acquired by working for SEE-u. Indeed SEE-u could not operate unless student advocates communicated effectively with each other and with other members of our Faculty community.

Good communication skills are not only important for the SA work but also relevant and transferable to academic life, particularly assessment requirements. Student H talked about how working for SEE-u enhanced his ability to work in a multi-cultural team and said that being employed for the university was a good way to get to know his lecturers. He highlighted development of other soft skills, such as team work and self-confidence.

Student B said that his communication skills were enhanced through attending official and unofficial meetings with different University units and departmental representatives. Student C felt that the work was much more than just work experience, because it involved mentoring and assisting other students, each with their own challenges, requiring skills for communicating with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

### **3.4 Time Management**

Faced with the challenge of balancing academic work and SA duties, the advocates have to learn to manage their time, manage projects and develop skills to prioritise different tasks and demands. Student A was happy

with the opportunity provided by SEE-u to share his time between studies and work and Student D added that effective time management was crucial to ensure success in her studies. Following the experience with SEE-u Student F said that he believed he had developed a much better sense of team working, but also improved time and resource management skills.

### **3.5 Training**

The service nature of many of the duties made it essential for student advocates to have initial training in customer service and to be pre-briefed on many facets of the service role, including handling conflict.

Student E, who was a team coordinator, highlighted the importance of training and its necessity for improving students' working skills. He said that the week of formal training provided for the induction of new advocates had a major impact on him and his new colleagues, because it covered almost all aspects of SA's job, such as customer service, presentation skills, working with international office, student union and disability office.

Student A's role was to design and create a new website, therefore he received a training in appropriate tools and applications, such as Moodle and WordPress.

### **3.6 Presentation Skills and Self Confidence**

When running the training for the second year's appointees some experienced advocates were able to lead development sessions in their own areas of acquired expertise and many of them contributed rich information from their own experiences into the induction programme. This is indicative of the increased confidence in their own abilities, particularly to encourage them to draw on skills for presenting, supporting colleagues and team working.

Good interpersonal skills were part of the selection criteria for student advocate appointments, but a few advocates that did not see themselves in a forward facing role were appointed because of other strong capabilities. This is specifically true of some Computing students, including Student A. In his feedback he alluded to experience of taking part in a conference requiring that he introduced himself to the audience, explained about SEE-u and his role as a SA. He emphasised the importance of the challenge he faced and his sense of achievement on gaining the strength and self-confidence to successfully complete this task.

Student B's responsibilities as a Learning Support Adviser within SEE-u helped to increase his self-confidence in decision making processes and in attending and sometimes conducting meetings with students and tutors. He also organised and led workshops and presentations on disabled student support for faculty staff and for students.

### **3.7 Customer Service**

At the beginning of their employment all student advocates receive initial training in customer service. Their subsequent experience of having regular contact with students, lecturers, other members of staff and all types of visitors serves to enrich their working skills and provides useful insights into customer support practices.

The day-to-day role of Students F and J was to help other students by solving common academic and non-academic problems, for example related to finance, coursework extensions, late arrivals and induction issues. Cases could be referred to them by staff or other students. They said they were dealing with customer queries by phone, e-mail or personally. Students F and J were part of the SEE-u student advocacy service that provide student support not available before SEE-u was founded. The advocates operated by providing one-to-one guidance, connecting and facilitating communications with existing services within the Faculty, University and sometimes outside. This required a deep knowledge of the provision and contact people particularly in the Faculty, central student services and the Students' Union.

Student B's responsibility was to lead a team providing a single point of contact for the Faculty with other University units in order to proactively support disabled students. Through this learning support coordination team it has been possible to create a comprehensive service, helping both staff and students, ensuring anticipatory pro-active support for any student with either declared or undeclared impairments. Student B's personal development through this work has been significant, not just in the area of Customer Service skills.

Student A concluded that having spent a great deal of time working in front of a computer he had never before realised how fundamental it is to collaborate with "real" people. Experience in SEE-u helped him learn how to work closer with colleagues, supervisors and other students who were actually his customers.

### **3.8 Team Work**

The international and EU student advocates gained experience in an English workplace situation and all advocates particularly valued the diversity of their colleagues and learning about different cultures. As a result some potentially lifelong friendships have been forged.

Student A highlighted that thanks to his work as a student advocate he opened himself to new cultures and learnt how to work in a multinational environment. Student B added that while being involved in coordination of few SAs when carrying out duties for supporting students with disabilities he also improved his team working skills.

Student C learnt how to adapt to new circumstances depending on the people he had to communicate with. Student F said that working in SEE-u had made an enormous impact on his life and personality, as he started to look at people from different perspective.

Almost all the ten SAs in this survey were assigned at some time to supervise colleagues or to lead a project. This provided excellent experience for developing leadership skills. So far each year during September there has been an overlap between graduating SAs and new SA appointments. This interval allows work-shadowing and mentoring to occur between old and new SAs following the training and induction and allows personal orientation before the busy start of year at the end of September.

## **4. CHALLENGES AND CONFLICTS**

The student feedback procured specifically for this case study painted a very positive picture of the Student Experience Enhancement Unit. Clearly the employability enhancement aspects of their employment are very important to the SAs. However it is important to strike the balance by reflecting in this paper about some less positive aspects from the experience of operating SEE-u to date. Although the management and supervision of SAs has been very supportive and developmental, it is important to recognize that not every member of the Faculty (permanent) staff welcomes or values the contributions from SAs.

Less positive experiences are part of a real working environment and SEE-u is no exception. SAs are advised during their induction for the role that all work-places have conflicts and challenges that need to be managed and resolved. A SEE-u code of conduct was developed by the student advocates that they are required to follow. On their appointment as SA they are required to sign a statement about confidentiality. They are given guidance about conflicts of interest and asked to take control if they feel they are compromised by any duties to which they are assigned. So far this is working well.

It must be noted that in common with the experience of the USA universities visited and studied as part of the development of SEE-u (Northwest Missouri State University, Boston University, PACE), no information security or integrity problems have arisen as a result of employing students. Despite this history of SEE-u, in April 2011 one staff respondent made reference to perception of lack of trust of student advocates working in areas of sensitive or confidential information. This is in contrast to the many strong views expressed by administrative and academic staff on this subject in 2008-9, when SEE-u was first established.

In the April 2011 staff feedback two respondents with opposing viewpoints alluded to some workplace conflicts involving the deployment and supervision of student advocates. Although it is apparent that most staff in the Faculty now accept and value SAs as essential, useful and effective colleagues, which represents a gradual and positive improvement in this perception over the lifetime of SEE-u, unfortunately a small minority of staff remain to be convinced that student employees need to be treated with the same respect and duty of care as any other part-time employee.

Other feedback received in April 2011 from non-student Faculty employees about their view of SEE-u and SAs was mixed, but the number of responses was too low to draw firm conclusions. Of the ten staff responses received from about 50 staff invited to submit, four contained some negative comments about the work ethic of some advocates, but the remaining six responses were highly complementary about the contribution and the effectiveness of the SAs.

The cultural diversity that makes the SA workforce so rich and vibrant can also lead to clashes of purpose and misunderstandings. Inevitably there are also occasional conflicts between the SAs that need to be resolved and disciplinary matters can arise, for example relating to timekeeping or punctuality. The SAs have an open-ended "zero hours" contract, which makes it straight-forward to omit a SA from the weekly work rota on a temporary or longer-term basis should the need arise, or if necessary to terminate the employment contract. Perhaps because of the careful selection and appointment process, there has been the need for very few

disciplinary warnings and in only three cases to date has dismissal been necessary, achieved in the form of no assignment to duties or non-renewal of the employment contract.

Student advocates have been generally tolerant of the very occasional negative work-place experiences and generally can reflect about it as an opportunity to learn for their future career. Some SAs are more likely than others to make a complaint after an incident. The SEE-u management team tries to minimize such problems through careful supervision and monitoring. However all incidents and problems are duly reported, investigated and where appropriate factored in to future policy decisions.

## **5. SUMMARY OF SEE-U DUTIES**

Concurrent with completing this paper a review of SEE-u was being prepared, aiming to contribute to the Faculty strategy, policies and budget for the future. The following list was prepared from SA responses to summarise the range of duties and responsibilities covered by the Unit during the academic year 2010-11.

- Reception duties, front of house role;
- Routine administrative support, filing, student correspondence, customer/student service which eases the workload for permanent staff, allowing them to focus on this higher skilled tasks, potentially enriching their roles;
- New or extended student services not possible before, for example the advocacy service, the LSA team, deferral application support, Post-EIP advice, student mentoring;
- Financial support for students and helping with student debit clinics;
- Handling staff timesheets and Finance Office support;
- Research and development activities in student experience areas, for example surveys into Activity Led Learning, BME student project and Disabled Student Engagement Project, analysing surveys;
- Campaigns requiring call centre skills, employability, placements, communicating with companies, Destination of Leavers in HE survey, retention contacts;
- Specialist development and support work, including IT and workshop technical support, Moodle support team, pre-induction web site development and operation;
- Support for academic staff, module questionnaires;
- Supporting open days and schools visits;
- Marketing and recruitment, prospectus development for 2012;
- Events management, conference planning and management, schools visits, professional body meetings, prestigious lectures;
- Research projects contributions to research activities and administrative support;
- Providing training and guidance for other student advocates;
- Supervision and support for other student advocates;
- Language translation, country and cultural advice for staff;
- Support for assessment handling and processing;
- Web site maintenance;
- Supporting and leading staff development workshops, for example on Black and Minority Ethnicity attainment research, Plagiarism and Disabilities.

In addition to the SA activities, permanent staff members of SEE-u also play significant part in leading and supporting operations and also by influencing policy and strategy at Faculty and University levels and externally, through working group and committee membership and research activities in matters affecting the student experience.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

From 2008 Coventry University's Engineering and Computing Faculty management took a bold and relatively expensive investment decision to move student employees to key front line support roles and to utilise the skills of student employees in a wide range of other roles. As this case study illustrates, SEE-u has enabled the Faculty to provide new services for students and significantly enhance the quality and quantity of the available student interfaces. In turn the student employees were able to earn essential income during their

studies without disrupting their attendance requirements. As the comments from student advocates convey, there is strong anecdotal evidence that a considerable range of soft skills essential to any professional career, plus more specific subject skills were acquired and developed in the course of their duties.

What may be less explicit in their statements is how the hybrid role of student-employees is helping to develop the spirit of a learning community in the Faculty and break down the barriers between “staff” and “student” identities. This in turn engenders a loyalty in the student employees, which results in good in-course retention and a remarkably high number of on-going progressions to higher level study at our university. Specifically four of the ten student participants in this case study (Table1) have graduated from their original studies and are continuing to higher level studies at the University. This was not foreseen as a target or benefit to the Faculty when the foundation of SEE-u was initially justified, but it provides an indication of the sense of belonging and ownership towards the Faculty maintained by SAs as a result of their dual study and employment roles.

The SAs are not shielded from tensions and challenges presented by the sometimes difficult roles and duties they are asked to undertake or from conflicts with personal demands or each other. However recent feedback from permanent Faculty staff suggests that almost all Faculty staff now accept that SAs are developing very useful skills and talents and helping to enhance and extend the range of services available for our whole community. The ability to manage difficult situations within the workplace is part of the portfolio of experiences that the SAs will take with them to their graduate employment.

It is without question that in less than three years SEE-u, SAs and other student employees have become a central and essential operational necessity to the Faculty. The range of additional services and the quality of the provision is far superior to what it replaced. As can be deduced from the different discussions in this paper and in earlier research, there are many and diverse mutual benefits to Faculty and to students from a policy of employing students in skilled and demanding part-time roles (Glendinning and Hood, 2011).

There is a high demand for the SEE-u appointments from students and unfortunately it is not possible to satisfy all requests for employment, (in June 2010 there were 130 applications for 20 new posts). However the success of SEE-u has encouraged other parts of the University and contacts at other universities to follow suit, creating additional employment opportunities for students. The Faculty recommends this model of student engagement to other institutions. Increased employability of our graduates is just one of the many advantages of this approach.

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