[P9] A learning package to develop and assess employability of bioscience students taking work placements

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Employability of graduates can be regarded as extending beyond the acquisition of a job to encompass a set of achievements (skills, understandings and personal attributes) which makes graduates more likely to gain and be successful in their employment (Yorke, 2004). A common approach to developing these achievements is the inclusion of work-experience components in higher education courses. These can develop not only specific vocational/professional skills but also the generic or transferable skills valued by employers such as self-confidence, political awareness, communication, team-working and interpersonal skills (Yorke and Knight, 2004). Reflective practice is increasingly recognised as a skill which enhances good quality academic achievements including many of those which underpin employability. This may be of particular value in the professional environment involving complex activities where situations are relatively unpredictable, and reflective practice has become a significant component across a range of professions including teaching and the health professions (Moon, 2004).

Work experience in a NHS pathology laboratory is offered in many BSc Biomedical Sciences courses as a placement year or multiple placement periods throughout the course. This can allow completion of a programme of education and training that provides graduates with eligibility to register as Biomedical Scientist with the Health Professions Council. Assessment of this professional training programme in many courses is by a portfolio which, while containing a strong element of competency attainment, also encourages a range of generic skills including reflection (IBMS). Although this new approach may contain elements unfamiliar to many professional training staff, practitioners are now being encouraged to develop new learning skills, for example in reflective practice (Ajeneye, 2005). We have developed a learning package which is aimed at extending the range of learning and teaching tools which can be used both for academic and professional portfolio learning and assessment. The learning and assessment exercises incorporate reflective practice and include specific outcomes of enhancing academic achievement and employability afforded by the student workplace experience. This has been developed, trialled and evaluated by collaboration between four HEIs offering BSc Biomedical Sciences courses that include appropriate work placements.

The package consists of exercises for level 3/4 students and level 5/6 students; these include an investigation into the relevant career pathway and evaluation of staff perceptions and opinions by arranged interviews with professional staff in the placement laboratory and a structured reflective document based on a ‘SWAIN’ analysis to assess generic employability skills developed by students. The project, funded by the HEA Centre

for Bioscience Teaching Development Fund, is being carried out over the academic year 2006-07 and the learning package will be evaluated by student outcomes and questionnaire data from students and placement supervisory staff. As well as providing a larger data set for analysis, this collaboration benefits from the pooled experience from four HE centres of Biomedical Science in the project design, and by the inclusion of a number of workplace settings which can show some variation in the quality of student experience and presentation of unpredictable situations. The reflective document is structured so that the employability skills section can be used for any bioscience subject area while the biomedical science discipline-specific section is adaptable to a range of bioscience-based subjects or disciplines. As part of the evaluation, the views of senior team members for a range of courses with work placements will be sought, with a view to assessing transferability of the learning package across the biosciences.

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