



USING WEB BASED INITIATIVES TO CONNECT EMPLOYERS TO DISTANCE LEARNERS TO ENHANCE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF EMPLOYABILITY.

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Summary

The Open University (OU) Careers Service has successfully piloted different ways of connecting employers to students by using our website at www.open.ac.uk/careers and social networking tools. In doing so, we have established a structure for ongoing employer engagement, enhanced our reputation with academic staff within the institution and with other Higher Education Careers Services and enabled students to gain a better understanding about the skills that employers require in the labour market.

Although 80% of OU students work while they study, many want more guidance on the graduate labour market and employers and on the kinds of skills valued by employers. In other UK universities much of this work is delivered via face to face workshops.

There were 3 strands to our work; an employer showcase; a suite of video employer clips; an asynchronous online forum, moderated by a Careers Adviser, enabling students to pose questions to 3 different employers.

All were successfully delivered, receiving very positive feedback. Future work is needed to establish whether students are more prepared and successful in the job seeking process. The initiatives are now embedded so there has been a long term value in bringing an employer dimension to our website and to students.

Introduction

This paper describes how the Open University (OU) Careers Advisory Service piloted different ways to connect employers to students using our website at www.open.ac.uk/careers and social networking tools.

The OU Careers Advisory Service is a relatively young service compared to other university careers services in the United Kingdom. It has only had a Head of Service since 2000. The service to students is delivered by part time Careers Advisers based in its 13 regional and national centres and a small Careers Service Development and Leadership Team based in Nottingham and Milton Keynes. Careers information, advice and guidance is primarily delivered by telephone, email and online (through the website and online forums) with a smaller amount of face to face guidance.¹

We are constantly challenged to deliver services to a large number of students (approximately 200,000 in total) from a very small staffing base. We know that although approximately 80% of OU students combine work and study,ⁱⁱ a high proportion of them are doing so in order to develop or change their career but need guidance on which employers to target and how to approach the job seeking and application processes for graduates.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our work with employers has been slow to grow but, as a result of our student feedback, we have embarked on a planned strategy of development in this area, particularly around raising employers' awareness of OU undergraduates and graduates and the skills and experience they can offer to the labour market and exploring ways in which we could connect students to employers.

The context, challenge and opportunity

It was clear that awareness of OU curriculum and students was patchy, particularly for graduate recruitment managers who had very rarely engaged with part time undergraduates and/or distance learners.^{iv} Often their approach to recruitment was predicated on reaching a target audience of young full time undergraduate students at campus based universities using campus visits and face to face presentations. Obviously this approach was not appropriate for the OU student.

In our favour was the fact that, in spite of increasing numbers of graduates in Higher Education (HE), many employers complained about the lack of talent and appropriate applications for their graduate positions. Furthermore they were aware that from 2013 demographic changes in the UK would potentially result in fewer young graduates coming on to the market.^v In addition, the diversification of HE and the introduction of Age Legislation in 2006^{vi} encouraged them to reconsider their approach to recruitment and to reach out to new markets where they might find a 'hidden pool of talent'.^{vii}

One of the 'unique selling points' of OU graduates to employers is that many are already equipped with appropriate skills and experience in the labour market. Many are studying in order to re-skill or to re-enter the work force, making enormous personal sacrifices in juggling work, family and study to change their career direction and demonstrating a huge commitment to their own personal development.

Three strands of work

We had established a careers website in 2001 www.open.ac.uk/careers and we had also begun to experiment with the delivery of themed online asynchronous forums from 2004.

Our website has allowed us to reach more students including prospective students and be more cost effective in the delivery of careers services. It has also allowed us to raise awareness of the service with staff and external organisations.

Our forums demonstrated that we could reach a lot more students that we were able to on a one-to-one basis, that interest in forums was growing and allowed students to learn from each other and build confidence in their approach to the job seeking process.

We therefore decided to use the site and forums as a vehicle for connecting employers and students by developing:

1. An 'Employer Showcase' on the website (currently titled 'Virtual Employer Fair')
2. A suite of video clips where employers talked about their application processes and the skills they required

3. An online forum involving 3 employers, moderated by a Careers Adviser.

Our objectives in these developments were as follows:

- For Employers:
 - To enhance their profile with OU students and learn more about them
 - To improve the quality of applications
 - To try out new ways of working with careers services and with a more diverse group of students.
- For Students:
 - To raise awareness about the labour market and the needs of employers
 - To provide inspiration and information about employers interested in OU students
 - To provide credible advice direct from employers about how to succeed in the recruitment process
 - To provide dynamic content on the website and to enhance content not covered in depth on the site.
- For Staff:
 - To provide a resource for academic staff and careers advisers to which they could refer students
 - To raise awareness with staff at all levels of the links the Careers Advisory Service has developed with employers, thus also enhancing the credibility of the service.

1. Virtual Employer Fair/Employer Showcase

This was first established in 2006 and our first employer was the Co-operative Group. There are now 32 entries on the showcase.

On the showcase, employers can raise their profile and awareness of what they do and what kind of graduate opportunities they advertise. The idea was attractive to employers as it was more cost effective than face to face events and of course, it was more appropriate for the distance learner. It was, in effect, a form of free advertising for employers and allowed the Careers Advisory Service to enter into a dialogue and partnership with employers, some of whom have continued to contribute to other strands of development within the OU. Employers were also encouraged to place vacancies with the OU Careers Advisory Service online vacancy service as a separate activity.

We established a template for the pages ensuring that it had the OU brand and feel (clean and relatively uncluttered) but it also allowed employers to deliver their own message and link students to their own site. We agreed with the employers that they would provide information under specific headings which the OU website team, working with the Careers Advisory Service, would then transform into draft pages for the employer to approve before going live.

What we learned from the project

There has been positive feedback from students about the presence of employers on our site and employers report that more students are applying for graduate vacancies than before, though this has been a difficult issue to track and monitor specifically. Some students,

however, have misunderstood that the showcase is not a vacancy site and we have tried to include more explicit wording about this in order to address this confusion.

We have been able to use content from the pages for articles and stories within the OU student magazine, again allowing us to raise the profile of both the OU Careers Advisory Service and the positive message that employers are interested in OU students and graduates.

In some cases employers have lost interest in the process of providing copy for an entry on the showcase as it inevitably creates some initial work for them. We have attempted to streamline and shorten the process to encourage more participation.

In 2009 we will change the title of the pages to 'Employer Showcase' rather than the original 'Virtual Employer Fair'. This is because many other HE Careers Services and partners are using the terminology 'Virtual Employer Fair' to represent a synchronous interactive recruitment fair where students can actually apply for jobs.

2. Employer Video Clips

In 2007/8 we filmed a small number of high profile large employers talking about different aspects of the recruitment process in order to incorporate these clips into a section on the OU careers website.

Students at traditional face-to-face higher education institutions often have a number of opportunities to meet employers on campus either in attending presentations about the companies, at fairs or in skills workshops led by the employers. At the OU we needed to think creatively to find a way of replicating this using our website.

The Careers Advisory Service worked closely with our website team and employed a consultant to do the filming and editing of the footage in preparation for incorporating it on the site. Time was spent considering carefully what sort of topics we wanted the employers to cover and what questions would need to be asked to address the topics from the right perspective.

The clips have subsequently also been used as part of an online tool for students and graduates that has been developed collaboratively with two other universities.

What we learned from the project

Employers were chosen with whom a good working relationship had already been developed. However commitment to video clips can be quite a sensitive issue to handle – whereas some organisations are quite happy to 'speak' via a showcase, some are more anxious about speaking direct to camera as often content might be scrutinised more carefully. We now recognise the need to be as clear as possible about the process and outcome and what we require from the employer. The project was more costly than the others but the content has been viewed very favourably by students and staff alike.

3. What Employers Want Forum

In order to replicate a more immediate exchange between employers and students we also decided to pilot an asynchronous online forum involving a small number of employers and a career adviser who moderated the forum overall. The Careers Advisory Service began experimenting with online forums in 2004.

The pilot employer forum ran from 6th to 26th February 2008. Three employers took part, taking turns to answer queries from OU students. 1452 students used the forum, 12% of whom went in between 10 – 20 times, which indicates they found it useful. The forum was 'read only' from February 2008 – February 2009 and continued to attract a further 1154 students whilst available.

The forum received questions on a range of topics, for example:

- Career options - what can I do with my degree, what kind of specialism could I apply for?
- Applications and interviews - how employers view CVs, what kind of interviewing format they use, how to present work experience
- Concerns, particularly those which preoccupy OU students - the impact of age on recruitment processes, the requirement that some employers still have for A levels, classification of degrees and perception of the OU degree
- Specific career questions - how to become a teaching assistant.

Feedback

In general students were very grateful for the employer responses and frequently sent a brief 'thank you' post following the employers' replies.

A small amount of formal feedback was received via an online survey. In the main the feedback was very positive with comments about the value of interacting with employers, e.g.

"It is of enormous benefit for potential graduates to interact with employers and to ascertain specific requirements for graduate jobs in specific sectors."

However there was some dissatisfaction that not all employers answered all the questions.

As with other forums one of the most visible benefits of the forum was the way in which students helped each other by sharing experiences and being supportive, giving advice about issues such as attending interviews and consideration of career options and providing reassurance about the job seeking process.

From an employer perspective most seemed to really enjoy the interaction with students on the forum and valued reaching such a diverse group of students in such a cost-effective and time-efficient way.

What we learned from the forum

We gained valuable insights into three large graduate employers' recruitment practices and employers gained insights into the diversity of OU students and their skills and concerns.

The forum also demonstrated that useful, complementary advice and support can come from an employer and a careers adviser working together.

In future we needed to consider the timing of employer involvement more carefully, perhaps having employers for a longer period and preparing them more effectively for the interaction and the kind of queries that OU students might be particularly concerned about. We would also need to be clearer about the commitment for the employer and the tone of forums so that they understood the manner in which they operated.

We also needed to be clearer to students about the availability of employers in terms of the timeframe in which they could reply. The moderator sent many messages to students

advising them when the employer they were addressing was available and that they would have to wait for an answer. As with other forums it is clear that the 'welcome message' is particularly important in managing expectations and using the forum effectively.

Conclusion

All three strands have been beneficial to the OU Careers Advisory Service in developing links and partnerships with employers and in developing our credibility within our own institution about how we work with employers. We have received unsolicited positive feedback from academic members of staff on our resources thus allowing us to develop more productive and creative work with them.

The specific areas of activity have given us a structure on which to base our interaction with employers that has resulted in a visible product for students and a way to feel connected, even at a distance, thereby enhancing their own understanding of the labour market and ways in which they can more effectively articulate their own skills and experience to employers.

For employers it has given them a new methodology of working with more diverse groups of students in different settings within HE and has helped them understand OU students and the skills they can bring to the workforce. It also has raised the profile of the part-time undergraduate market.

In 2009 we have used what we have learned from the forum in 2008 and have experimented with another forum focusing on different aspects of employment in the public sector. The forum has lasted longer, but employer involvement has been more focused and specific. We are also exploring the potential to be involved in synchronous 'virtual recruitment fairs' and are trying this out within external partnerships with other HE careers services.

In June 2009 we will receive an OU Teaching Award for our website, associated resources and online forums.

References

- ¹ OU careers website at www.open.ac.uk/careers and Statement of Service at <http://www.open.ac.uk/careers/about-the-ou-careers-advisory-service.php>
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