

Part 2: Embedded employability

2.1

Title: Enhancing key legal skills and student engagement through an innovative, authentic assessment

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Course: The 'Academic and Career Development' module is mandatory for undergraduate Stage 2 students on the following courses: International Law LLB (Hons), Law LLB (Hons) and Business Law LLB (Hons). These courses are delivered by the School of Law, Faculty of Business and Law, Coventry University.

Introduction:

The purpose of the Academic and Career Development module is primarily to enhance students' existing legal and professional skills with respect to research, writing, and legal and business awareness. The module seeks to provide information and guidance on the use of such skills in their potential careers, and builds on skills taught in the Stage 1 module: Academic and Personal Development. The module also seeks to provide feed forward for students in respect of key skills for the purposes of the Stage 3 module 'Career Planning and Management', which students take in their final year.

These three modules provide an opportunity to blend the students' academic skills with professional awareness and employability. Through a series of lectures and tutorials, students are encouraged to identify their chosen career path and will be given advice on placements, CVs and writing application letters. They are also encouraged to reflect on their current legal studies and research for the purpose of enhancing those skills and their academic confidence.

Owing to its more practical, skills-based and somewhat untraditional nature of delivery and assessment, this second-year module, 'Academic and Career Development' has traditionally been a difficult module to engage students with, as reflected to some extent by previous module evaluation questionnaires. As such, the co-authors were tasked with redesigning the module for the 2017-18 academic year to enhance student satisfaction, engagement and appreciation. This has been achieved by designing a forward thinking, innovative and authentic assessment.

Aims and rationale:

The aims underpinning the redesign of the module's structure and assessment were primarily threefold, though all aims overlap significantly to complement each other. As noted above, engaging law students has often been difficult for modules such as this one, which focus on employability and key skills. The changes to the module were therefore primarily intended to increase student satisfaction, engagement and appreciation for the module's underlying purpose. The changes to the module have also improved the students' overall learning experience by helping to better prepare them for the world of work and to become better global graduates.

Implementation:

Firstly, an authentic assessment for the module was designed which took the form of a job application to a fictitious law firm, 'Beaverbrook & Sons Ltd'. The job specification outlined certain functions that the positions would entail, such as researching, drafting educational documents for outreach work, and assisting legal practitioners. The assessment required the students to submit a cover letter (Part 1), answer some basic competency questions which focussed upon key academic skills and asked them to reflect on the acquisition and development of those skills from year one of their course (Part 2), and finally to write a critical case note/analysis on a recent case decided in the UK domestic courts (Part 3). The assignment instructions reflected the job specification for the fictitious firm, which required the students to cater their cover letters towards the firm and their activities, and to provide reflective answers to competency questions about their strengths and weaknesses on their law course thus far.

The case note was also intended to promote student engagement, employability and key skills, as students were instructed to focus on a recent case which would be of interest to the public or which was important for students to learn about. Crucially, this has encouraged the students to consider the role that the law plays when responding to current legal problems that affect wider society. Moreover, embedding some level of public engagement into assessments helps students to consider their social responsibility and roles as future leaders. As such, in many respects this type of assessment differs considerably from traditional forms of assessment such as examinations or coursework, although some of the skills in terms of presentation, addressing a specific task and analysis can be employed in other assessments on other modules.

Secondly, to add authenticity to the assessment and encourage student engagement, several additional teaching materials were created specifically for the module. A bespoke website for the fictional law firm was created using *Weebly*; a free and user-friendly website which allows users to design and build new content for custom-built websites. This website reflects real-world practice, and features a fictional board of directors, client testimonials and the legal services offered by the firm. A series of newsletters was also created via *Microsoft Publisher*, which outlined

the fictional firm's latest activities, information about the firm's casework, as well as key tips about employability and job applications. These materials were relatively straightforward and quick to produce, simply requiring creativity, some basic experience at content management systems and *Microsoft Publisher*, and knowledge about the legal sector and employability. For this last aspect, the input of the Law School's Employment Personal Tutor was particularly valuable.

Thirdly, to further encourage student engagement and appreciation for the purpose of the module, prizes were offered for the best student submissions. The best five job applications, based upon the best cover letters and responses to the competency questions (Parts 1 and 2 of the assessment), were awarded Waterstones gift vouchers. The ten best case notes (Part 3 of the assessment) were published in a special edition of the *Coventry Law Journal*, which is edited by Dr Steve Foster. The winners were presented with their prizes (including a copy of the journal for the best case notes) in a second semester class, and the students' case notes were then included in the next issue of the Journal, which appears on Westlaw and thus provides the students with a recorded publication of their work.

Feedback:

Following these innovative and dynamic changes to the module structure, assessment and teaching materials, student satisfaction, engagement and appreciation for the module's purpose increased significantly. The increase in overall student satisfaction for the module has been particularly noticeable. In 2016-17, before the change of leadership and the module redesign, overall student satisfaction was 71%. Following the change of leadership and the module redesign, overall student satisfaction increased to 89% in 2017-18, which was replicated in 2018-19 again at 89%.

The new materials have been well received and appreciated by students and staff. This has been demonstrated by the high number of website "hits", with several hundred visits to the website in the peak period running up to the assessment deadline. The materials also received commendation from the Faculty's Associate Dean for Quality and Accreditation, Beverley Steventon. The materials were circulated in a Faculty Quality, Learning and Teaching (QuiLT) Committee for the benefit of all Schools. Lastly, the materials were particularly singled out and applauded by the external examiner for the module in the February 2019 Subject Assessment Board.

Strengths and weaknesses:

This case study demonstrates that authentic assessments and innovative teaching materials can greatly assist in the teaching and learning process, whilst also enhancing student satisfaction, engagement and appreciation.

Firstly, these materials enhance the digital fluency of staff and students, by producing and incorporating online materials into the assessment.

Secondly, the assessment embeds employability into the teaching and learning process, by requiring students to demonstrate that they can research a potential employer for the purpose of the assessment. The input of the Law School's Employment Personal Tutor was particularly valuable in this respect, as she was able to convey what is expected by employers in the current, increasingly competitive, job market.

Thirdly, as an authentic, business-engaged assessment model, this form of assessment is easily transferable and can be used in other disciplines. Whilst this particular assignment concerned an application to a fictitious law firm, it will be easy to design a similar brief and teaching materials for other subjects and disciplines. For example, a similar approach might be used for students applying to an accountancy firm, a newspaper publisher, or any other kind of internship.

Finally, students are given the opportunity to appreciate that personal, professional and employability skills are related to the skills required on their current legal studies, by addressing the specific task in hand, rather than writing in a general area. Additionally, the module assessment highlights the benefits of employing a clear and appropriate grammatical style in explaining their experiences and in providing legal examples. In that respect, the cover letter aspect of the assessment (Part 1) demonstrates the importance of attention to detail and good presentation.

In terms of weaknesses, some students are not persuaded of the benefits of the module and the assessment, and are sceptical of a module which does not solely test their legal knowledge. The number of these students is, happily, declining, and we have a further opportunity in year three to embed these basic skills, when the students are more aware of the need to achieve higher results.

Positive outcomes:

A particularly encouraging aspect of the module in both years was the overwhelmingly positive responses to the module evaluation question concerning the use of online learning environments to support learning. Furthermore, based on informal feedback from students in 2017-18 and 2018-19, it is clear that the opportunity for the best case notes (Part 3 of the assessment) to be published in the *Coventry Law Journal* has considerably enhanced student engagement and appreciation for the purpose of the module. This benefit does not simply apply to those students who receive prizes for the best case notes, but to the majority of students whose skills in dealing with case law is enhanced and which can be applied successfully in their other modules.

Additional Resources:

Coventry Law Journal (2018) *Special Issue: Student Case Notes* [online] available from <<https://login.westlaw.co.uk/>> [3 June 2019]

Coventry Law Journal (2019) *Special Issue: Student Case Notes* [online] available from <<https://login.westlaw.co.uk/>> [3 June 2019]

Foster, S. (2019) *Legal writing skills: A guide to writing essays and answering problem questions*. 5th edn. Harlow: Pearson

The custom-built website of the fictitious firm, which includes the three monthly newsletters, can be found at <https://beaverbrookandsonsltd.weebly.com/>.

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