

‘Getting on Board’: Supporting HE students’ transition to employment

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ABSTRACT: In 2013, The Get on Board (GOB) extra-curriculum programme was launched at Edinburgh Napier University’s Business School with the aim of placing students on the boards of local charities, voluntary sector organisations or public bodies, where they could practice key skills for employment, network with professionals and help make decisions that impact on their community. To date over a hundred students have been supported by the Business School and community partners with training, networking opportunities, mentoring and career guidance. Last year the Programme team carried out an investigation into the value of the learning experience by interviewing students who have taken the programme and also interviewing a trustee about the value of students on boards. Through this research, we have identified good practice in the current Programme and opportunities for further support to enhance students’ transitions to employment.

1. Introduction

Delivering an excellent and personalised student experience is at the heart of Edinburgh Napier University’s Strategy 2020 (Edinburgh Napier University, 2015). This includes providing accredited, work-related experience linked to the curriculum as part of every student’s experience (Edinburgh Napier University, 2015). One of the avenues to do this is through student volunteering. This paper seeks to examine one particular award winning extra-curriculum initiative, the *Get on Board (GOB) Programme* at Edinburgh Napier University, that seeks to build active citizenship through community engagement and provide an opportunity to enhance student learning and their transition to employment through the development of Professional Practice skills. The research presented in this paper sought to evaluate the learning experiences of students during this Programme and identify areas of improvement needed to support students’ employment transitions more effectively. The research findings are discussed below, but firstly, relevant background literature is presented.

2. Workplace Skills

In the UK students have customarily engaged in volunteering throughout their degree studies. However, Brewis (2010) notes that for most of the 20th century volunteering was ‘unheralded’ and not seen as central to a University’s mission compared to research or teaching activities. This viewpoint is now under review (Munck, 2010). Paull *et al.*, (2015) suggests that current forms of academic learning are insufficient to equip graduates with the requisite skills for the workplace, particularly active citizenship, and this is one factor for the current move towards advocating university student volunteering. This line of thinking is reflective of previous research where the Dearing Commission into HE (Dearing, 1997) called for a greater emphasis in the undergraduate curriculum on the development of key skills and work-related or community-based learning. However, Dezure & Holland (2002) argue that these developments need to meet the needs of community partners to provide an opportunity for

'bridging' as well as 'bonding' of social capital (see Putham, 2000 cited in Arthur & Bohlin, 2005).

3. The development and recognition of Professional Practice Skills

It is recognised that transferable skills developed throughout University study can be applied to an individual's professional and social life (Crebert, 2004). When related to the concept of 'personalised learning' this sees Universities encouraging students to take responsibility for their own skills development (Walsh & Kotzee, 2010) as active learners in the curriculum and self-select co/extra-curricular activities that will support opportunities to co-generate social capital in their communities. As indicated in the Robert's Report (2002:p131) "*Students need to be aware of the nature and value of their own transferable skills, and to take ownership and responsibility for their learning*".

However, allowing students to identify their own learning needs is not enough to support the development of effective professional practice skills. The literature notes that vital to the success of this endeavour is the need for Universities to establish clear and structured pathways to give currency to student achievement in the skills development chosen (Falconer & Pettigrew, 2003). Yet many issues abound with regard to how to deliver this in a coherent way. Weaver et al.'s (2015) QAA research into UK prospectuses identified that there was plenty of student choice in co/extra-curricular activities and that all of the HEIs surveyed marketed transferrable skills and employability as being available to students during their academic programmes. However, on reviewing 100 UK HEIs websites, there was a lack of meaningful clarity in the use of the term 'transferable skills' and this reflects Jones (2008) in Bourner & Millican (2011) and Baker & Henson (2010) concerns about the lack of precision of educators use of this term. As a result of such imprecision Schulz (2008) suggest that it is vital for Universities to re-examine, re-define and take ownership of the term 'transferrable skills' to ensure transparency for all stakeholders.

One suggested way to effectively record transferable skills of students is 'The Higher Education Achievement Report' (HEAR) (Burgess, 2012) an approach adopted to expand student's academic transcript to include learning and achievements over the course of a period of study including transferrable skills demonstrated in co/extracurricular activities. The HEAR initiative (Burgess, 2012) thus seeks to address the need to recognise student learning and achievement outside of the classroom and support in a consistent way both applications for employment and further study. In 2015, Weaver et al., (2015) found that only 44 institutions had adopted HEAR so far and 94 out of the 100 websites reviewed still had their own skills award. This therefore suggests that as useful as HEAR is frequently the co/extra-curriculum experience offered by Universities is at a higher level of recognition than is needed for recording in a HEAR report. These specific University skills awards often have wider criteria than HEAR which allows more students achievements to be recognised (Sparqs, 2012). So additional structures aside from HEAR appear needed to support students' skills recognition. Weaver et al.'s (2015) research revealed the 'best employability' initiatives were being aligned to the student's degree pathways and reflected the professional skills expected to be demonstrated by graduates. For example, both Nottingham University's Advantage Award and Strathclyde's Skills Award excelled at offering a cohesive framework of both extra and co-curricular modules (both credit and non-credit bearing).

Despite these pockets of excellence, the issue of developing a cohesive skills award framework presents a number of challenges to HEIs in the increasingly difficult funding climate that UK Universities find themselves in. Yet the need for such approaches to actively

encourage students to become more engaged (Pike, et al., 2009) could be viewed as essential in a society that seek to harness the professional skills of its workforce to resolve its pressing social and economic concerns. Our own institution, Edinburgh Napier University has decided to adopt HEAR, but as indicated, this may well need an additional skills awards framework to further recognise the activities of our students. Additional skills frameworks would capture the students' opportunities for developing professional practice skills including the GOB Programme (the focus of this paper). The key features of the GOB programme, which gives students the training and opportunity to engage as a trustee member on a board is outlined below. However, first we present a brief discussion of the importance of students as Trustees to appreciate why the professional skills associated with this type of opportunity are important to develop in our students.

4. Untapped Potential: Students as Trustees

Although volunteering is vibrant, trusteeship is one example of a volunteering activity that is less understood and embraced by students. This is not just a Scottish issue but a UK wide one, since one in seven of the 834,000 UK trustee boards have insufficient number of trustees (NCVO, 2012). This appears an untapped opportunity for students to develop critical skillsets that will support life-long learning and active involvement in their communities. Turning to Scotland there are at least 45,000 third sector organisations in Scotland and almost 24,000 of these are registered as charities (SCVO, 2014). These organisations play a vital role in creating a strong and inclusive national identity. Part of this is a direct contribution of 1.2 million volunteers participating and supporting the needs of Scotland's third sector organisations (Dacombe & Bach, 2009). In Edinburgh alone, 90% of the 1800 voluntary sector organisations report vacancies (Edinburgh Volunteer Centre, 2016). This indicates an opportunity to harness talent from a greater and more diverse pool of applicants, such as University students (Weaver, 2015).

The development of students as trustees is novel and no literature exists on the opportunity and benefit of encouraging students to get on boards of charity, voluntary and/or public boards. However, Lord Hodgson undertook a review of the Charities Act 2006 in 2012 and suggested promoting trusteeship in Universities (Hodgson, 2012). In the past five years, there has been an interest promoted in the press; by the Charity Commission and campaign groups such as 'Young Charity Trustees' to highlight the opportunity of getting more young people on boards. In Scotland, OSCR reported in 2009 that 69.1% of respondents to a survey by Cranfield University of charity trustees were aged 50 or over (Kakabadse et al., 2009). The Charity Commission (for England and Wales) reported that the average age for a Trustee is '57' (Charity Commission Report, 2010). Consensus is building that young people are hugely under-represented on Boards yet can bring significant benefits to the strategic table (i.e. ideas, viewpoints, representation of user-groups) (Charity Commission, 2010). The picture is not dissimilar in Scotland, with a dearth of young trustees reported across the sector (Trustee Week, 2014).

5. The Get On-Board Programme

In 2013, Edinburgh Napier University support for developing an enterprising and active culture among students, led to the pilot of a new programme called 'Get on Board'. The programme was set up in partnership with the Governance Forum and a Young Trustees in Scotland

group (created by our students). The GOB initiative demonstrates Edinburgh Napier's commitment to instilling the University as a public good. The programme links to the University's 2020 strategy to provide "*Support structures to facilitate and promote engagement with business, industry and the community across all subject areas*" (Edinburgh Napier University, 2015).

GOB allows students to develop skills such as leadership and decision-making and make a positive difference to communities.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLES OF INNOVATION IN AND THROUGH THE PROGRAMME



- First training and coaching programme of its kind to promote Trusteeship combined with a real board experience in Universities in the UK.
- Participants can receive membership to the Association of Corporate Governance Practitioners (ACGP) and can gain professional recognition by sitting the ACGP examination.
- Young Professionals as Trustees (YPTrustees) network established by Napier students to act as partners and co-producers in developing and delivering the training. YPTrustees offer student-led sessions, a networking breakfast and in collaboration with the University Careers Service 1:1 coaching support.
- Pilot has been lead to the development of a postgraduate module called Leadership in Board Governance that launches September 2017.
- Enhances University community links, i.e. a strategic partnership with the Voluntary Action Fund, Scotland leading to a Knowledge Transfer Partnership Grant from Innovate UK and a research project with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.
- Supported by the Napier Student Association volunteering network "VBase," providing students with access to board vacancies. This has led to fostering links to identify volunteering opportunities with selected community projects and charities.



GOB has been operational for four years with over 100 students who have participated in the programme. While informal evaluative data has been gathered on the programme delivery and outcomes via standard module evaluations from participating students along side feedback from external partners and critical friends, it was decided to analyse this programme's learning experience in more detail and establish to what extent these promote the development of professional practice skills. The research also sought to capture potential future enhancement features including exploring the development of a personalised skills award framework for students based on the competencies necessary to fulfil a trustee position.

6. Research Methods

Nine semi-structured student interviews to gather qualitative data from current and past students of the GOB Programme took place in Spring/Summer 2016. Four of those interviewed were PG students and five were undergraduate students in Year 2 or 3 of their degree studies. Most of the students interviewed were from the Business School but two were from other Schools in the University. The questions asked explored the knowledge, skills and attitudes developed as a result of undertaking both the programme and the board experience offered. The second part of the study was an in-depth interview with an expert in the field of board governance who was a trustee on a board where one of the students had been a member. The interviews were analysed and key themes that arose from the students' experiences and those of the trustee interviewed are presented in the following section.

7. Good Practice Identified in the GOB Programme

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the students valued their experience on the programme. Three key areas that arose from the data that indicated particular benefits that students gained from undertaking the programme are summarised below - *acquiring professional practice skills in real world situation; the opportunity to apply Governance theory into practice and extending networks and improving their networking skills.*

7.1 Acquiring Professional Practice Skills in Real World Situations

The benefit of acquiring or improving professional practice skills in situ is reflected in participant 8's comments about why they choose the GOB programme: *"I thought this would be a good opportunity to really learn the tools and how you should do it". (Participant 8)*

This reflects Paull et al's (2015) point that some work-based skills are not being effectively taught in the classroom and that by being given access to real-world situations the students can hone their workplace skills further by facing complex situations and problems that are multi-faceted, intractable or involving conflicting viewpoints.

During the GOB programme students are supported and mentored to take on board roles as soon as they feel ready. Participant 2 noted, therefore, the clear link between his classroom learning experiences and active participation on a real board: *"When I joined x board it was a result from the programme...they invited three members of the first programme." (Participant 2).*

For participant 1 the process of going beyond the skills being developed through the standard curriculum was critically important in choosing the GOB as an extra-curriculum experience in preparation for their future career:

"I felt that it would give me a lot beyond what I would be getting in my programme [Degree studies] on its own...it is very important to have an experience of joining a board and attending a board meeting". (Participant 1)

7.2 Opportunity to Apply Governance Theory into Practice

The Programme is designed to support students to explore and discuss the key theories of board governance in a peer setting. One benefit of the Programme that the students' emphasised was the opportunity to apply such theory into practice during their time on the Programme: *"There was first of all theory then we applied cases and...I think I learned a lot from that."* (Participant 7)

Participant 6 also noted that not only could they see how to apply theory into practice but they also realised when that practice did not match with the theory being taught on the Programme: *"When industry or banks do something naughty. It's just interesting...that understanding of what proper governance should be"*. (Participant 6)

The programme therefore provides the students with an opportunity to become better informed, and more able to take on the call for 'active' citizenship that appears in the literature (Paull et al, 2015).

7.3 Extending Networks and Networking Skills

One area highlighted by all the students that was particularly beneficial was the ability to extend their existing networks and practice their networking skills through both undertaking the programme and undergoing board experience. As noted by Participant 2:

"I feel the amount of contacts I've been able to develop especially is quite useful...if there has been an event or conference...it is useful to attend these and show that you are not only keen to be involved but also to learn more, connect and develop networks". (Participant 2)

Participant 9's comments also echoed this point:

"GOB organised a few events so that we can meet the chairs of committees, chairs of third sector organisations, board members, directors for third sector organisation". (Participant 9)

For one student the opportunity to go beyond their own discipline and work with other students in the University was a particularly beneficial experience:

"It was very different from my own discipline. The people who came into contact with the programme definitely, enhanced the experience that I would have had on my own program on its own...I have a secondary network...and I feel that I would definitely ...participate in this network in the future". (Participant 1)

These valuable community of practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that the students now feel connected to offer the possibility of tapping into collective 'resources', including 'stories' and methods to overcome common issues that (young) trustees may face.

7.4 Expert in Board Governance Findings

The expert in board governance highlighted some positive areas regarding the GOB programme and from their perspective the involvement of students on a board. Firstly, they identified that there was additional creativity, an influx of new ideas and new linkages to stakeholders through student involvement:

“I’m hugely keen on this whole process and...I would envisage a student, supplying this vital link to younger people and possible being creative as to how to develop that link.” (Expert 1)

This clearly relates to Dezure & Holland (2002)’s argument of both bonding and bridging of social capital through volunteering with community partners.

Similar to the students, the expert also highlighted as beneficial the opportunity GOB gave to enhance student work related skills in a community of practice:

“from work-skills point of view, it’s not just theoretical, it’s actually in practice...the experience of sitting at a board table with 8 other Board Members who are considerable older than them and how to present their arguments, sensibly authoritatively, to engage the interest of the other Board Members and to think out their arguments carefully.” (Expert 1)

8. Further Enhancements

Although the sample was small, based on the analysis of the findings some straightforward suggestions emerged for further enhancement of the programme. Firstly, more board shadowing was recommended by the interviewees to provide an opportunity for the students to engage in even more practical experiences during their studies (Munck, 2010). Additionally, indicated was more support between the workshop sessions coupled with continual mentoring of the students in trustee skills beyond the duration of the course (through the appointment of a ‘mentor’ or “someone to talk to”).

Further community of practice activities (Lave and Wenger, 1991) were also emphasised to enhance the student experience. LinkedIn or other social media tools were seen as useful for bonding and connecting “*the young trustees community*”. Likewise, it was highlighted an online version of GOB would provide greater opportunities for all students in the University to undertake board training. One student identified the potential of GOB to be rolled-out even further than University wide: “*I think...the support that the Uni. gives us...needs to be taken to more Universities, and the more Universities have it the better.*” (Participant 5).

Reflecting on the research data has also allowed the team to identify the need for a more coherent framework to govern and allow additional formal recognition of the skills, knowledge and attitudes developed and demonstrated by the GOB students. The early draft of this framework, (the suggested format is depicted in Appendix 1) could be seen as a mechanism to provide a clear and structured approach to formally acknowledging extra-curriculum activities at Napier. Our initial ideas envision the framework including bright red triangle enterprise training, the sales challenge and the activities offered in VBase volunteering. Furthermore, the framework has an emphasis on ‘Open architecture’ to enable GOB students to experience development opportunities externally to the University.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, The award winning GOB initiative is an example of an innovative approach to enhance student learning in HE to support the skills needed for effective board governance. Currently, there is no systematic framework to support the development of trustee skills for students in the UK. One of our proposed enhancements to the GOB initiative would provide this much-needed framework. Another useful enhancement suggested during the research

was focused on additional mentoring of GOB students to embed and enhance the development of professional practice skills further and prepare students for their transition to employment.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Young Professionals as Trustees Framework

Award		Requirement	Evidence for Award
<i>Entry to 'Foundation' award: Open to all Edinburgh Napier University students</i>			
Foundation	Bronze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend 'Bronze' Welcome session Examine individual Strengths/Weaknesses using a relevant leadership competency development framework (e.g. Institute of Directors Competency Framework) 	Participants are expected to attend the 'Bronze' session AND submit the reflective practice summary of key learning and competency development (See GoB1).
<i>Progression to 'Practitioner' award: Open to all 'Bronze' awardees upon the submission of the application to progress to 'Silver award' (see GoB2)</i> This includes: Participants current status, suitability & motivation for progression and signed the YPaT Code of Professional Practice (or an alternative discipline specific code). Participants encouraged to receive <i>Associate Membership of the Association of Corporate Governance Practitioners</i> .			
Practitioner	Silver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend 'Silver' kick-off session Attend CPD sessions provided by the University and/or recommended partners (see appendix B) to demonstrate a <u>range</u> of activities from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competency development sessions (e.g. knowledge, skills and mind-set) Readiness to Get on Board sessions (CV prep) Networking/board matching event <i>Leading to critical reflection and PoPP compilation</i> 	Satisfied 'Bronze' AND: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attended at least 14 hours of Professional Development relevant to developing competencies noted in GoB1 and in support of fulfilling a board position, evidenced using the log of Professional Development (see GoB3) for each learning opportunity. Submitted entry to be listed on the YPaT 'Board Talent Bank' (See GoB4) Submitted a Portfolio of Professional Practice (PoPP), including logs of Professional Development (GoB3) and a reflective summary to demonstrate competency development, in light of participants GoB1 submission. Submissions may form a written reflection or short video Passed a 20-30 min Viva, chaired by Course Leader (or equivalent)
Professional	Gold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate Professional Development relevant to position over a sustained period Hold at least six months of board level experience Participated in a appraisal/360 feedback from a peer on the board/mentor (or equivalent) 	Satisfied 'Silver' AND: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated PoPP Obtain a Letter of support from peer on the board/mentor (or equivalent) to demonstrate a) at least six months board level experience and b) participated in an appraisal
	ACGP	'Silver' participants are encouraged to pursue professional accreditation with ACGP See AGP (Associate), MGP (Member), FGP (Fellow) criteria: http://www.acgnglobal.org/types-of-membership	