Real life commercial project - working for students

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Faculty of Organisation and Management

Subject group:	Business Operations and Financial Information Systems (BOFIS)
Number of students involved:	Up to 40 per delivery
Elements of the employability framework addressed:	• Development of autonomy • Key skills development • PDP • Real world activities • Work related learning • Reflection on use of knowledge and skills; transfer of these to work environment • Career management skills • Preparation for specific professional areas • Enterprise, innovation and creativity

Description of learning and teaching approach adopted

Students receive a short block of intensive lecture sessions covering:

• Approaches to consultancy and theoretical foundations

• Contracting and management

• Management of change and cultural sensitivity

• Reflective practice and consultancy project selection

Once the autonomous student teams have selected a specific project, from the project briefs we gain from external organisations (i.e. client sponsors) they are then left to work at their own pace and on their own initiative, this is after a first meeting for them with the client company which is also attended by their academic project supervisor.

Each team is assigned an academic supervisor who is usually a member of the BOFIS subject group, though this need not be the case if expertise is required from other subject groups within the faculty.

Prior to the Christmas break, all teams are brought together, with their respective supervisors, to deliver a short presentation to the whole cohort as to their progress, problems encountered, changing terms of reference, action and project planning etc. This session is designed to facilitate questioning by all present, and also for everyone to make suggestions. The benefit of a fresh informed or not informed pair of eyes has really made some teams see their projects differently after this session. It also builds relationships and furthers the learning experience.

Throughout the delivery of this module students are continually encouraged to reflect upon events, their contribution, key skills and how it and they develop, their strengths and weaknesses relevant to the interventions and thus identifying skills gaps and providing opportunities for career action planning. It is recommended that they keep a journal or learning log. Though this is not collected or formally assessed it does form the basis of their individual reflective assessment component.

From this point student teams progress with the aid of their supervisor, to the point where they deliver the assessed elements of the module.

It is important to note that the success of this module is also due to the excellent attitude of the whole BOFIS subject team who are willing to spend time with student teams and discuss their problems and ideas/solutions whether they are receiving time tabled hours for this or not.

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The assessment package is two-fold:

Academic Formal Assessment:

A group report and presentation to the clients, around Easter, timed to suit the diaries of all relevant stakeholders (40% and 20% respectively). These are assessed and moderated by two academics.

An individual reflective account of the intervention process and of individual learning (40%) again assessed and moderated by two academics.

We especially reward creative, innovative and enterprising solutions and recommendations and approaches to actually conducting the consultancy interventions. Some of the more modern approaches to managing the process are covered in the intensive sessions.

Client Business Solution Informal Assessment:

In addition to the academic package of assessment the students also feel a massive amount of informal and personal assessment based upon whether the sponsoring client likes, accepts and implements their proposals. This is really taken to heart by them and is without doubt one of the major factors in explaining their tremendous enthusiasm and commitment to these consultancy interventions.

Employability objectives and intended learning outcomes

The aims and intended learning outcomes are, as defined in the module specification:

Summary of Aims:
The taught element of the module aims to provide a foundation of consultancy theory upon which subsequent interventions in real-world organisations can draw.

The consultancy intervention itself will locate this theory in a practical context. The work will usually demand some integration of methods, techniques and approaches, drawn from across relevant modules within the fields of business and management. However the precise content of the work is driven by negotiation and balanced between the client's requirements and academic expectations.

Arriving at this agreement is seen as a key part of the intervention, in addition to placing demands upon students to deliver added value for their clients, the aim of the intervention is to enable students to put their learning about the consultancy process into practice, and to provide a vehicle for its critical examination.

More often than not, in the first meeting where the above takes place, the original project brief supplied by the client organisation requires little more than some clarification and fine tuning - negotiated between themselves and the students and this does provide an opportunity for reflection.

Anticipated learning outcomes:

On completion of the module students will be able to:

- Understand the nature of consultancy processes and the factors which a consultant needs to consider to design and manage a successful intervention;

- Use structured approaches, relevant concepts and theoretical frameworks to advise clients facing complex problem situations;

- Demonstrate professional consultancy skills appropriate to a role as management advisor or change agent;

- Appreciate the challenges of managing relationships in consultancy practice - notably handling the pressures within a consultancy team and the inevitable tensions of the client-consultant relationship - from project inception to completion;

- Evaluate the underpinning theories of consultancy and their implications for practical interventions;

The employability objectives are somewhat more implicit:

Students develop their autonomy as they request advice and supervision as they feel appropriate, the projects are student managed.

As well as developing consultancy knowledge the students have to assess their own key skills strengths and weaknesses and attempt to plug any gaps that exist in relation to the specific real world work related projects – these projects are real, live and often time critical to the sponsoring organisations which constitutes work related learning.

Plugging the skills gaps can be via additional learning on behalf of individuals or by group member selection (we cover skills analysis/audits in one of the intensive directed sessions) or by a combination of both. Students are required to reflect upon this as part of their individual submissions and relate it to professional and personal development planning (PDP) as well as reflecting upon how they have transferred skills and knowledge to the working environment of the sponsor organisation.

Description of and tips for good practice; lessons learned

The mode of delivery – i.e. short intensive sessions followed by student led working with occasional feedback checking sessions is very much liked by the final year students, especially as they know they can draw on academic supervision and advice as necessary.

In the past some student groups have not, in our opinion, drawn sufficiently upon the academic support. As such this has been noted and the supervisors have become more active in calling for updates either face-to-face or via the use of IT.

As a mark of good practice, this module at level six, by far, gives students the best possible opportunity to bring together their learning from levels four and five, along with their learning, experiences and developed acumen from their placement year. This really appeals to them as it develops both module/ intervention content and process, in addition, it also provides them with a major project and achievement which they are proud to add to their CV and has in cases created a major discussion topic in interviews.

Key points of any feedback gathered or evaluation undertaken with students or staff

We have several letters of thanks from sponsor organisations and have had interest from the Sheffield Business Link, Asda Walmart and Microsoft in taking part in future deliveries. Organisations which have taken part in the past have always been ready to continue with their support and have also provided feedback as to the implementation of the student's recommendations/solutions.

In the past two deliveries, the external moderator has singled out this module for special praise in terms of its excellent student results and for its promotion of employability and development of external links.

Students are surveyed each delivery and the comments are again 100% positive. A selection of project sponsor and student comments are provided below:

"I really enjoyed this module… I would enjoy doing the experience again"

"We felt a responsibility to achieving high aims for the client"

"We became united as a team"

"This is the first group project that I have ever been happy with the results!"

"I've learnt a great deal from the experience"

"The presentation was such a high point"

"We were all very proud of our achievements"

"Nearly all of the ideas will be implemented – thank you"

"One of the two best modules I have ever taken"

"In the first year I would never have believed that I could have achieved so much"

"We can implement this with confidence – thank you"

"Give me XYZ's email addresses I want to offer them a position with us"

Last delivery did result in three job offers to our students, one of which was taken up. This student is already earning an above average salary and is still with the sponsoring organization who still support this module.

Resources used

The module requires relatively few resources. Allocated hours to IT enabled lectures total just 15 hours (5 * 3) with supervision of groups hours allocated around 5 – 8 per project group. Supervision rarely requires rooms to be requested as may take place informally in the University Delis or in staff offices.

Mostly, assessed presentations take place at the sponsoring organisations place of business, though some do prefer to visit the University hence some room requests and odd refreshments are requested.

If the module is to develop further there is ample opportunity to utilise technologies such as video conferencing and also to extend the use of SHUSPACE facilities such as WIKIs collaborative group working tools and discussion boards etc.

This information can be made available in other formats.
Please contact us for details.