Employability Sabbaticals: Experience of 'Boundary Crossing'

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Abstract

This research project was developed as a response to the employment of undergraduates. In Sport and Exercise Science the academic staff who teach and carry out research may not have had contact with the Sport Industry for some time and the development of employment sabbaticals was perceived to offer a solution to this. At Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in the Department of Sport and Physical Exercise was involved in evaluating the sabbaticals. This research reports on two case studies in the Sport sector and draws on 'boundary crossing' (Wenger, 1998) to explore the experiences of two academics who were involved in this development. Two in depth semi- structured interviews were conducted with each individual during the period of their employment and the findings are reported in this chapter. A key finding was that sabbaticals can be a very effective tool of boundary crossing between academic staff and employement sector helping to 'reveal' key information on "craft" knowledge and skills required from graduates to be successful in gaining work within football, exercise and health related environments. Academic Cmmunities of Practice (CoP) can benefit from the development of more realistic understanding of students' employability in a practical way.

Introduction

Sport Science graduates experience similar challenges to other graduates but have some subject specific issues that they need to address. Career pathways of the Sport Science graduates are often not well defined and it can be difficult to find a job with the immediate scope graduates originally hoped for (Sleap and Reed, 2006; Ferkins and Fleming, 2004). A high percentage of graduates with sport degrees struggle to find employment in the sector and a third of employers stated that training does not meet their priority needs (Skills Active, 2005). In addition there is considerable diversity within the sport and recreation industry such that a full range of skills can not be covered in any one degree structure (Fleming, 2005). Since many qualifications in sport are relatively new and therefore employers are often unaware of the knowledge and skills the graduates are equipped with, there is also a need to give employers a 'feel' for the quality they should expect from new graduates (Ferkins and Fleming, 2005).

These issues were recognized by the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at the Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) through the student and industry feedback. In order to maximise staff and student opportunities for developing academic and applied competencies relevant to the world of work, the School - a designated Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), initiated sabbatical programme. The programme provides staff with dedicated time to interact directly with employers in sport and health related settings, to be able to better understand the labor market and to 'fine tune' the curriculum reflecting the knowledge and skills demanded by employers.

This paper is focusing on the experience of two academics who undertook sabbaticals to facilitate the interaction and get insight into employers' CoP. Drawing upon the Wenger's (1998) theory of 'boundary crossing' and Granovetter's (1983) concept of strong and weak ties, the aim of this research is to explore the benefits and challenges of the scheme and lessons learnt from this initiative, the potential impact of findings on the curriculum and how outcomes can inform a more broader university agenda on promoting work related learning. In the following section we review the literature on 'boundary crossing' and introducing other concepts, which are relevant to the context of discussion. This is followed by two case studies and description of the research method. Then we are analyzing experience of the sabbatical holders from the perspective of 'boundary crossing' theory and drawing on findings and conclusions in relation to the improvements of the scheme.

Theory of 'Boundary Crossing'

From Wenger's perspective, boundaries historically exist between communities of practice (CoP), alongside discontinuities between participants of different communities. At the same time, in order to survive, CoP have to develop ways of maintaining an connection with other relevant communities, and this is where 'boundary crossing' happens. Boundary crossing is enabled by 'boundary objects' (Wenger, 1998) – these could be topics or artefacts meaningful for both communities. Members of different CoP, while having different approaches to what they do, coordinate their joint activities around an object, which "gives some common meaning across the settings where the activities take place" (Tuomi-Grohnand & Engestrom, 2003, p.5). Tensions regarding the meaning and importance of the boundary object are part of what members of different CoP have to take into account in their

attempts to co-ordinate their different interests. According to Wenger (1998), the boundaries between communities can be crossed through the use of 'brokers'; they are people who are "able to make connections across CoP, facilitate coordination and open new possibilities for new meanings" (Tuomi-Grohn, 2003 p.4). Being able to operate in both communities (mainly through previous experience/encounters), the brokers can bring practices and translate meaning of one community to another. Particular skills are required from brokers in order to be successful in the process of translation and some people are better than others in influencing and negotiation function that brokering requires. A factor that appears to play an important role in successful boundary crossing is the strength of the ties between CoP. Strong and weak ties are ways of conceptualising the bonds which exist between members of a society. While strong ties are important for emotional bonds and confirmation within an individual's private network (they mainly exist between close colleagues, friends and family or in a relatively close CoP), weak ties play a part in the dissemination of ideas between communities, thus facilitating information exchange between networks of strong ties (Granovetter, 1983, Haythornthwaite, 2002).

Case Study 1 - Sabbatical in Physical Activity, Exercise and Health

The first sabbatical was aimed at enhancement of employability skills provision within the Physical Activity Exercise and Health degree programme. The two main aims of the sabbatical were: to examine employer's perspectives of the knowledge, skills and personal attributes required of individuals working in Physical Activity Exercise and Health and to identify research, enterprise and applied opportunities for the students on the programme . The sabbatical was also used as a vehicle to set up the consultative committee for longer-term input into the programme.

The sabbatical was one semester long and involved two stages: stage 1- personal visits to a diverse range of employers (policy makers, non-profit organisations, primary care trust, and voluntary organisations) to inform about current programme design and content, and to obtain feedback, advice and recommendations in relation to academic, vocational, and volunteering aspects of education that are required of the graduates. During this stage the sabbatical holder (SH1) undertook 20 semi-structured interviews. The initial interviews questions were based on the findings of 2 pilot interviews. Interviews lasted on average between thirty minutes and an hour. Based on these interviews (stage 2), a questionnaire was created and distributed to regional and national employers in order to expand the scale of the feedback.

Case study 2- Sabbatical in Football Science

The second sabbatical was undertaken by the leader of the BSc Science and Football programme to enable him to work within football related organisations and to ensure that curriculum contains appropriate opportunities for the development of employability skills. Among the aims were also the following:
- To explore a possibility to provide more dedicated placements for students
- To examine career pathways of relevant staff within football-related organisations.

Alongside curriculum and skills related agenda, there was a strong 'knowledge transfer' component to this sabbatical. The intention was to investigate the role of sport science within football and to deliver contemporary information on the current methods that are used within the professional game to develop elite players. The sabbatical holder (SH2) engaged in work activity whist at the organisation as a performance physiologist, and used the knowledge base to enrich the working practices of organisation he is visiting.

To achieve these aims, a number of organisations within football were visited; these include professional clubs, community based groups, the Football Association National Disability Squad and Premier League Referees. The sabbatical was one year long and placement lengths varied from one to two weeks. Each placement had specific objectives to achieve, depending on the profile of the organisation. During the visit, there was an opportunity to informally interview and observe the practice of a number of different staff within the organisation, including coaches, referees, players, physiotherapists, education and welfare officers.

Method

An important feature of the sabbatical scheme is its emphasis on research and evaluation, focusing on in-depth studies of individual experience of sabbatical holders and providing valuable insights into the challenges of preparing students for employment. Both sabbaticals, while pursuing a common goal of enhancing the employability aspect of the curriculum through work with employers, were different in relation to the type of interaction with employers: 2-3 hours interviews in first case and full immersion into the organisational practice in second case. The experience of the sabbatical holders was evaluated through interviews carried out by CETL researchers. The first set of interviews was conducted immediately (approx two weeks) after sabbatical proposals were accepted with a purpose to improve the organisational side and general support for sabbatical submissions.

The second set of the interviews was undertaken as a part of interim evaluation 4/5 months after the start of the sabbaticals. The interviews were of semi-structured nature, with a set of pre-determined questions usied in adaptive manner to permit the interviewees to explore issues meaningful for them and interesting areas in more depth as they arose. Verbal informed consent was given by the interviewees, and interviews were recorded and then transcribed for thematic analysis. The key themes identified by the analysis were the following:

- How the experience of 'transfer' from one CoP to another was perceived by sabbatical holders
- How much time and effort does this transfer involve
- Communication problems and other challenges experienced as an 'outsider'
- Emotional background of 'boundary crossing'
- How the chosen 'boundary objects' worked
- Interim finding that could have an impact on the academic CoP

Preparation for Boundary Crossing

The processes involved in preparation for 'boundary crossing' in case of the two sabbaticals was different. In order to arrange initial interview visits, sabbatical holder1 (SH1) decided to contact relevant organisations by e-mail and briefly explain the context surrounding the sabbatical. Some of the chosen organisations previously had links with the university through other members of staff, but there was also a sufficient number of new organisations. SH1 felt this strategy of initiating interaction was not as effective as hoped.:

> …in hindsight I think I approached people from the wrong angle, I outlined the CETL, but they didn't know what the CETL was… It wasn't a complete disaster as some people endorsed it… The difficulty was getting people from different professions: NHS, local authorities and private organisations.

Having initially very 'weak ties' with these people or no ties at all, it was difficult to establish a rapport, since in weak networks personal commitment is fairly fragile as people involved are exposed to very little risk if the link fails. It was also clear that 'boundary object' chosen initially was lacking the important contextual information that would make it useful to the receiving community of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002), and the way of information exchange didn't contribute to the success of communication.

Having got this experience, SH1 sent out paper base letters with a more detailed explanation of the mutual benefits and expected value of employers' contribution in conjunction with similar emails:
> … I thought maybe informing them of what we hope to achieve, that we are trying to skill up the employees of the future and we can only do that by talking to them. Something clicked then and people were enthusiastic and wanted to get involved…

SH2 had established personal links with majority of the organisations, though previous work. Since the ties were much stronger, there weren't any particular obstacles in arranging visits. As emphasised by Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom (2003) crossing boundaries involves encountering difficulties, entering into territory in which we are unfamiliar, and thus require significant cognitive retooling. When asked how demanding and time consuming were sabbaticals in comparison with their normal university work load, SH1 reported that the work load was approximately equal, with the majority of time/effort focused on preparation and contextualising the work that had to be done:

> A lot of thinking time that goes on around this … I had some knowledge of the area but in the early stages had to get out there, find out what was going on, what research was already being done, that's quite time consuming…

SH2 also undertook cognitive retooling, but it happened though the placements themselves, as a result of the activities and meetings taking place on the sites. Full immersion into the everyday practice of the organisation also meant that sabbatical activities could take up to 14 hours daily:

> .. I may be in a football club from 8 in the morning till possibly 10 at night if I am going to games and things…

While both SH were released from their teaching hours, they still had continue with their administrative workload and keep in touch with everyday life of their departments:

> When I come home at night I can start going though the 30 odd emails I get a day, it is hugely time consuming…(SH2).

SH1 commented that:
> … although it has not produced a double load, it has been heading in that direction, which has been quite stressful at times - to switch from sabbatical mood to administration mood. Trying to juggle things is difficult...

Maintaining Links with Own CoP and Feeding Back

Both SHs emphasised that maintaining links with students and colleagues throughout the sabbatical and feeding back on what they've found was very important for them :

> … *you do need that link, and the continuity with the students, especially with such a small program …I don't think it (complete withdrawal) would be possible… It is trying to have the best of both worlds (SH1).*
> > …*There isn't one visit that I go on where I don't come back and say to [the CETL leader] "…I found this out, this would be really great, can we do something about this?"(SH2)*

In the case of the Football Science sabbatical, students and staff had a chance to read reflective reports of the visits posted on the institutional VLE Blackboard. A discussion forum was set up to allow students to ask any questions they may have about the visits and help them reflect upon the nature and role of sports science within football. Interaction with students and results of students focus groups undertaken by CETL researchers, had an impact on the process and content of the enquiry:

> …*I had an impression of what was and wasn't interesting to people when I started that first post, but I have read the stuff generated from talking to students and that has made me think… So for example in the last visit, I could have a opportunity to go on the field and watch training but I didn't I staid around and started talking to staff… (SH2)…*

It was also found that although the sabbatical holders received support and occasional opportunities to discuss process and interim outcomes of the sabbaticals with colleagues and CETL researchers, both SH reported feelings of isolation/detachment from their normal university environment, because of inability to share immediate findings and emotional experiences. Thus, SH1 admitted:

> … *Talking to X, Y and Z was very useful... Maybe [we have to] create a research steering group in the school, had a meeting at the beginning to make sure I was not guiding the research too much… You can feel a little isolated sometimes, you have all these great findings but no one to share them with…*

SH2 suggested to have a regular forum or working group with other sabbatical holders and programme teams where they would have an opportunity to discuss findings and possible implications to the school and curriculum.

Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge transfer chosen as a 'boundary object' by SH2 proved to be very successful strategy, prompted further plans for the 'knowledge transfer days' when football clubs' staff could spend a day at the university, getting more comprehensive picture of relevant research activities and outcomes, and university staff would go to the clubs for the day. An interesting finding was that the role of the 'broker' proved to be more complex/multidimensional than anticipated, since brokerage happened not only on vertical level (between the academic community and the community of football practitioners), but on horizontal level also (between different football related communities) and this was facilitated/mediated by SH2:

> … *For example at the last visit most people have been interested to talk about practices of other people: So what is so and so doing? And how do they deal with this? And we deal with it this way… In some cases it has been direct "supposedly you are an expert in this", in some cases it was "what else is happening?" These people are very isolated, it is a very busy environment and they never talk or get to go to many other places in most cases. So me, visiting different places, in some way was a opportunity to find out what other people are doing…*

Impact on the Curriculum and WBL Opportunities

At the point of interim evaluation both SH reported/highlighted that direct contacts with employers proved to be very effective for enriching and even re-considering previous understanding of students' employability. For example, one of the main findings of SH1 was that there are differences in interpretation/definition of the same skills by employers and in the academic environment. For example from academic point of view, communication skills are linked heavily to presentation skills, while employers highlighted the ability to communicate effectively with a wide rage of people in a verity of settings, so emphasising the interpersonal side of the skills. As a result of the sabbatical, a number of additional topics will be added to the curriculum to address high demand for the knowledge, as well as assessment methods being more closely tied to what students would do in their job roles (for example marketing campaigns and writing quarterly reports).

SH2 reported that observation and personal stories of staff working in football organisations contributed to developing a more realistic understanding of employment in football and the limitations of the universities programmes:

> *I don't think that at the end of a three year degree people are necessarily ready to go and do these jobs because they don't have a lot of the abilities they might need… All we can do is to raise awareness… I cannot teach them all these things but I can give them more guidance about what they need and tailor elements of the program to that…*

The importance of practical experience through WBL and volunteering was also emphasised:

> *Other thing I am picking up from them is the experiential side and the reluctance to let people in who don't understand the environment … So it is becoming more and more important for us to tell our students that they need to go and get experiences because if they don't then these people will never let them in…*

Both SH stressed that personal contacts (strong ties) facilitated through the sabbaticals helped to create more opportunities for student placements, including longer term WBL projects, entrepreneurial activities and other prospective developments for the school.

General Satisfaction and Issues of Academic Identity

In both cases, levels of satisfaction in relation to what was achieved was reportedly quite high and translation of meanings and negotiation proved to be successful:

> *I think these people are open if it's sprung the right way and in a contest they can understand…(SH2)*
> *… I am definitely finding that going out and being on the ground to speak is opening up a lot of opportunities for the school… (SH1).*

While SH1 didn't report any communication or other problems/tensions that may have arose (which could be explained by relatively short visits and well prescribed communication scenario for both sides), the experience of SH2 was much more controversial. Necessity to adjust communication style and behaviour to be better understood and accepted, contributed to the feeling, described by Thorpe (2003) as 'brokers' uprootedness and even inadequacy:

> *I knew what kind of communication things to use … But it is difficult and draining trying to not be your natural self but being some other way for the whole time period. And switching between things on occasion... Because of my experience I managed to do that. But it is difficult and there are times when I find it hard to do that … because it is very alien to me (SH2).*

Issues of academic identity were also highlighted by the SH2:

> *There are days when I enjoy it and there are days when it is so utterly depresses me I just don't want to be around those places… It goes from a real kind of spread of feelings, because … you see situations that you just know people aren't able to cope with…People make decisions … when maybe they are not in a place to make them. I can see it is so complicated… with my skill base which maybe better than some of these people… That's hard to watch sometimes I think…(SH")*

This finding concurs with Wenger's (1998) who observed how members' experiences of different communities of practice entails the possibilities for identities that are both productive as well as of conflicting nature, and advises to find a compromise by avoiding two opposite tendencies: being pulled in to become full members and being rejected as intruders.

Conclusion

Interim evaluation demonstrated that sabbaticals can be a very effective tool of boundary crossing between academic and employers' CoP, helping to 'reveal' key information on "craft" knowledge and skills required from graduates to be successful in gaining work within football, exercise and health related environments. Academic CoP benefited from the development of more realistic understanding of students' employability; new partnerships were built and existed ones strengthen based on mutually beneficial information exchange and knowledge transfer, learning resources based on up-to date practice (reflective reports from the placements) were created. This type of engaged, work-based practice offers academics the space in which they can make a difference, not only in relation to their own practice but also to that of others. Importance of going further and developing more stronger links with industry was mentioned by SH1:

> *I think maybe try and do it over a longer time period, like to do something similar to [SH2]… Maybe try and target people we only have weak links with….*

At the same time 'brokerage' proved to be a challenging experience that was very time consuming; leading to feeling of isolation and uncovering conflicts between real practice and the "ideal" academic world.

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