

# Enhancing Graduate Employability: a case study compendium

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# Developing transferable employability skills by embedding practical application of theory into a module

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## Background

The nature of work and the future patterns of employment will require sound subject-specific skills but these need to be underpinned by a range of transferable skills (Universities UK, 2018). Transferable skills are often referred to as soft or employability skills and include communication, teamwork, problem solving, creativity and analysis (Universities UK, 2016). How these are developed or embedded within degree programmes can be challenging. However, it is possible to design modules that do have a clear focus of developing these. Lifestyle Management, a core module in the final year of our Physical Activity and Health degree, was adapted to focus on developing transferable skills. Many students graduating with this degree go into employment requiring graduates to work with people to elicit behaviour change to increase physical activity. In many cases, this will mean working with people with diverse social and health needs and communicating with external agencies. The subject knowledge and theoretical aspects needed for this are covered in earlier modules on the programme. However, there are few opportunities within the programme to apply these to a non-student population or other than from a purely theoretical perspective. To develop the module the CareerEdge model of employability was used (Pool and Sewell, 2007). Following consultation with a local authority employer operating a dedicated Health and Wellbeing team, skills required for employment were identified and mapped to the module. The particular focus was to develop two components of the EDGE model, generic skills and emotional intelligence.

## Approach

The Lifestyle Management module focuses on students working with real people to elicit behaviour change, with the purpose of building upon subject knowledge, but also developing a range of soft skills. Skills identified are listed in table 1.

**Table 1. Skills Identified by employer**

Work independently	Problem solving
Supporting others	Organisation
Collaboration	Flexible thinking
Emotional intelligence	Adaptability
Communication – verbal and listening	Professional skills – attendance, punctuality, preparation, confidential.

To facilitate this the module is linked to the university's Healthy Working Lives initiative to increase the physical activity of university staff. Working with staff allowed students to engage in a real-world situation, within a safe supportive setting.

Nineteen students registered on the module, 11 sport and exercise students and eight from other departments electing to take the module as an option (two social science and six mental health nurses). The module has 10 hours of lead lectures, one practical class and ad hoc client fitness testing sessions based on the availability of staff. In week three of the semester students in pairs (sport and exercise with non-sport/exercise student) began working with their clients; meeting them weekly for nine weeks; during this time they helped support clients to make behaviour changes. Clients were 20 staff who were recruited through a university-wide call out for Get Fit in 2019. The module was subsequently assessed via a case study in which students outlined and justified the behaviour change processes they had used. From week five of the semester all students were required, in their pairs, to attend debrief sessions. These timetabled sessions took place every second week and were designed to provide ongoing support. These were included to ensure students had the chance to ask questions and also enabled the module tutor to check that what they were doing with their clients was appropriate. This also provided a safety net for both students and their clients. Face-to-face contact with staff has been found to be rated by students as one of the most valuable forms of support, especially when embedded within the curriculum (Hockings *et al*, 2017).

## Outcomes

Challenges through the module included students having to show fluidity in their thinking in order to understand and be sensitive to individual client needs; ability to adapt to changing demands and circumstances such as clients missing meetings or being unable to undertake recommended intervention programme as a consequence of ill health. There were some polarised perspectives of students on the worth of the module and the requirements to undertake independent work. However, the vast majority of students were positive about the module. Aspects emphasised included working and supporting staff to make lifestyle changes, for some it was the applied practical aspect they liked, regarding this as '*playing to their strengths*.' Also, the fact this was a real project rather than one made up for the module, which has been the norm in other modules, meant that a number of students highlighted that they could use the Healthy Working Lives project to enhance their CVs. Some students also, through self-reflection, identified aspects of themselves that they needed to work on, eg "I need to be more confident"; I talk too much, I need to listen more." Feedback from staff was also very positive with the majority reporting an excellent experience, many reported being fitter and healthier, others saying that it should be run again next year or even that it should run throughout the year.

However, it is recognised that the project was not without challenges. The main issue experienced was poor attendance, although this was a minority of students and mostly on the part of students who were taking the module as an option. From conversations with students it transpired that almost all of the mental health nursing students were working full time. This meant that their time in university was very limited, resulting in the students effectively removing themselves from opportunities for learning and developing the intervention programmes with their staff clients. These students did not attend debrief sessions and were therefore unable to obtain support and advice; staff clients were let down and other students working with them had to shoulder more responsibility. Examination of end of module grades reveals that the more frequently students attended debrief support sessions the higher their grade, although there was individual variability within this. This is not unusual as previous research has underscored the relationship between attendance and performance (Kassarnig *et al*, 2017).

Key messages from feedback and observation of the module suggests that it is necessary to give a very clear outline of expectations and organisation at the start of the module with this needing to be reiterated throughout the semester. This was possible to do for those students who attended debrief sessions but not for those who chose not to attend. The timetabled debrief sessions throughout the semester provided a clear structure for ongoing support. Students who engaged with these were able to take on board suggestions and act upon them and probably made them a little more fluid in their approach to their clients. For the students, the aligning of the applied component of the module to the university's Healthy Working Lives initiative meant the students had something tangible to add not only to their CVs but also in job applications and interviews. For the students, this made their work real with concrete outcomes of seeing their clients achieve their goals. Three of the students were subsequently able to emphasise this when they applied for employment in lifestyle change projects.

One area that needs to be considered is the assessment undertaken. The case study provides a clear focus for the students to demonstrate their understanding of theory and their ability to interpret and apply this. However, a review of the module will consider if it is possible to assess some of the process of working with clients across the semester and whether the inclusion of some aspect of self-reflection should be considered. This would allow students to reflect personally on the development of the highlighted transferable skills. Also under review will be the weekly organisation of the module. Coordination of a large number of staff and student diaries to arrange client meetings was problematic. In the future, the possibility of having sessions timetabled will be explored.

However, it is evident that stepping away from the usual classroom lecture format allowed students to develop and hone a variety of transferable skills. For some, this was a challenge, especially at the beginning, but it did help develop their confidence and allow them to apply their knowledge and skills. University staff were supported to achieve beneficial lifestyle behaviour changes and, by aligning the work undertaken by the students to the Healthy Working Lives project, the module was able to contribute to the university maintaining its gold award.

## References

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